



Fergus Hume

1906

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G. W. DILLINGHAM COMPANY

PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

**LADY JIM of
CURZON STREET**

A Novel

**By
FERGUS HUME**

Author of
"The Mystery of a Hansom Cab," "A Coin of Edward VII,"
"The Pagan's Cup," "The Yellow Holly," "The Red Window,"
"The Mandarin's Fan," "The Secret Passage," etc.

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Lady Jim of
Curzon Street

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XIII

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XV

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAPTER XIX

CHAPTER XX

CHAPTER XXI

CHAPTER XXII

CHAPTER XXIII

CHAPTER XXIV

CHAPTER XXV

CHAPTER XXVI

CHAPTER XXVII

CHAPTER XXVIII

CHAPTER XXIX

CHAPTER XXX

CHAPTER XXXI

CHAPTER XXXII
CHAPTER XXXIII
CHAPTER XXXIV
CHAPTER XXXV

LADY JIM OF CURZON STREET

CHAPTER I

"We're on the rocks this time, Leah, smashin' for all we're worth. How we can win clear beats me."

With hands which had never earned a shilling thrust into pockets empty even of that coin, Jim Kaimes stretched out his long legs and surveyed his neat boots as he made this cryptic speech. His habit of expressing himself in a parabolic fashion was confusing to his friends. But five years of marital squabbling had schooled his wife into ready comprehension, and she usually responded without comment. On this occasion, however, the subject under discussion irritated even her healthy nerves, and she replied irrelevantly.

"Really, Jim, I wish you would talk English."

"Huh! Never knew I was talking Choctaw."

"You might be, for all the sense an ordinary person can make of it."

"Ah-a-a!" said Jim, with the clumsy affection of a bear; "but you're not an ordinary person, Leah. I'm the common or garden ass, that can't straighten things. Now you can."

"For want of a husband I suppose I must."

"Come now, Leah. Am I not your husband?"

"Oh yes!" she answered, with a flick of her handkerchief across a pair of scornful lips: "*my* husband, not *a* husband."

"What's the difference?"

"As if I could waste time in explaining. We have more serious matters to talk about than your want of brains."

"Serious enough," assented the man, sulkily; "but you know how to deal with trouble, Leah."

"I ought to," retorted his wife, with a shrug, "considering the experience I have had since marrying you. I wish I hadn't."

"So do I," confessed Jim; then mended his speech with a dim sense of having overstepped the mark: "No, by Jupiter, I don't mean that. You an' I get on very well, considerin' each swings on a private hook. You are not a bad sort, Leah, and I'm a--a--a--well, you know what I am."

"Not a diplomatist, certainly. Isn't this praise a trifle obvious? You don't mean it, do you?"

She looked at him wistfully, but her candid husband soon stopped any sentimental illusions she may have momentarily entertained. "Oh yes, I mean it in a sort of way. An' good temper on both sides will help us to push through the business quicker."

"You mean the Bankruptcy Court," snapped his wife.

"Perhaps I mean the Divorce Court," was his tart reply, but she was quite ready with an answer.

"On your own part, then; you can't say a word against me."

"Who said I could? You've got the one virtue that gives its name to the rest, and think yourself an angel."

"I had your assurance that I was an angel--once."

"No doubt. It's the sort of thing a man has to say to the woman he is engaged to."

"And never says to the woman he is married to!"

"Marriage isn't all honey, Leah, and----"

"Heavens!" Lady Jim addressed the ceiling; "as if I required telling. But compared with other women, Jim, I am not----"

"I never said you were," interrupted Kaimes, crossly. "I'd screw your neck if you went on like other women."

"Upon my word, Jim, I would admire you more if you did attempt something of that sort."

"Sorry I can't oblige you; but I'm a gentleman and bear an honoured name."

"An honoured name!"

"Sneerin' won't alter facts, Leah. The name of Kaimes has always been honoured----"

"Till you dragged it through the mud," interrupted Leah, in her turn. "The old Duke is all right, and Frith's a kind man, if somewhat dull. But you--oh heavens! to think that such a Saul should be amongst the prophets."

Jim, not understanding the scriptural allusion, thought he was being chaffed, a liberty which his bovine pride resented by two minutes of sulky silence. Moreover, he dreaded his wife's formidable tongue, the lash of which could cut through even his tough hide.

"How are we goin' to get through the business at this rate?" was his next contribution to the conversation. "You don't remember that I've to meet a fellow at the club to see about a bet. An' I haven't got one shillin' to rattle against another," declared Jim, pathetically.

"Well," was the sharp reply, "I have to shop this afternoon with but one miserable sovereign in my purse."

Lord Jim opened his sleepy blue eyes. "I say, you couldn't----?"

"No," said his wife, decisively. "I couldn't and I wouldn't, and I can't and I shan't. Perhaps you'll read the paper and let me think."

"All right," said Kaimes, reaching for the *Sporting Times*. "I want to see the bettin' on Podaskas."

"Betting will be your ruin."

"Has been," corrected Jim, chuckling; then reverted to his early metaphor: "We're on the rocks this time, Leah, and no mistake."

His wife cast a look of scorn on the pink-and-white face she had once thought handsome. And, indeed, Kaimes was good-looking in a heavy Saxon way. Tall and muscular, with the strength of a bull and the manners of a bear, he was precisely the sort of brutal athlete to attract women. They flocked round him like bees, and gave him more honey than was good for him. He accepted their endearments with the complacent vanity of an egotist, and took little trouble to please even the prettiest, whereupon he was adored the more.

Leah, with her elbows on the breakfast-table, stared at Jim's well-brushed head bending over the pink sheets, and asked herself, for the hundredth time, why she had married him. Physically he resembled a splendid Hercules, but in another sense the likeness was not a speaking one. He satisfied her eyes, and in no other way gave her pleasure. When he talked, he babbled vainly about himself and his doings, to the exclusion of any topic likely to interest other people. Possessed of that easy good-nature which refuses nothing, which costs nothing, Jim Kaimes was looked upon as "a good fellow," a title which covers a multitude of the minor sins. Jim would have been meritorious as a cave-man, and pre-historically perfect. As a civilised being he left very much to be desired.

The subject was neither agreeable nor inexhaustible, and Leah rose with a shrug of her shapely shoulders. Jim looked up.

"Well?" he asked encouragingly.

"Nothing!" said his wife, curtly, and moved to the window.

Here she leaned against the sash and looked at the narrow grey street which was such a good address to impress tradesmen, and so expensive to live in. Not that the question of rent troubled the pair. They paid none, and would have been as much insulted, if visited on quarter-day, as an Irish tenant. The Duke of Pentland at the time of their marriage had presented them with the furnished "10, Curzon Street," but hampered with certain restrictions. They could not sell it, or even mortgage it, nor could money be raised on the furniture. The Duke paid all rates and taxes, and saw to all repairs. Beyond dwelling in this very desirable residence, and calling it publicly their home, Lord and Lady Jim had no interest in it whatsoever. Both thought it was ridiculous that they could not turn the Curzon Street house into money, when they needed ready cash so badly.

And life was so hard to people of their standing and tastes. Leah came of a bankrupt family, and had brought nothing to Jim but her own clever, beautiful self. She considered the two thousand a year which the Duke allowed his second son opulence, until she learned what delightful things money could buy. Then Jim used a large amount of the quarterly payments on his own account, and tradesmen would not give her the delightful things without money. She certainly had bills in nearly every shop in Bond Street and out of it, but even bills had to be paid in the long run. The post brought a good many, and brought also lawyers' letters, not pleasant to read. Between them, this happy pair had mortgaged their income, and the money they had obtained was all gone. Now they had no income and many bills. What was to be done? This problem Jim had set Leah to solve, but clever as she knew herself to be, the solution was beyond her.

"Can't you borrow, Jim?" she asked, turning gloomily from the window.

"Perhaps a fiver," was the prompt response; "every one's as mean as mean. I've tried 'em all. And you?"

Leah shook her head.

"Twenty pounds, for all my asking."

"There's your godmother, old Lady Canvey," suggested Jim. "She's as rich as Dives."

"And, like Dives, won't give a penny to this Lazarus. She smiles, and talks epigrams, and preaches, but as to helping----" Leah shrugged her shoulders again.

The action drew her husband's attention to a very magnificent figure which was loudly admired. Jim had admired it himself before he had got used to seeing it in the breakfast-room. Now it struck him that this attraction might be turned into money.

"You're a ripping woman in the way of looks," he said, throwing down the newspaper; "if you went on the stage--eh?"

"As the fairy queen?" inquired his wife, scornfully: "that's about all I'm suited for. I know the things I can't do, Jim, and acting is one. Besides, think of what the Duke would say."

Jim yawned, and lighted a cigarette.

"He can't say more than he has said," he remarked, lazily. "'Sides, I never go to hear him preach, now."

"No; you send me."

"Why not? The Duke loves a pretty woman. You can twist him round your little finger."

"I can't twist any money out of him," said Lady Jim, irritably.

"More's the pity. We're on the rocks----"

"You've said that twice already."

"An' I'll say it again and again and again," snapped Jim. "You don't seem to realise the hole we're in."

"Don't I?" she queried, with an emotion she would never have shown in society. "I realise that I have one sovereign; and you----?"

"Only a fiver I intend to borrow from a sure man," said Jim; "but I say, what's to be done?"

"We must go through the court."

"What's the use of that? It'll only settle our debts. We want ready money. I don't care a straw about the tradesmen. Can't we let this house?"

"No; the Duke says we can live in it as long as we like, but if we leave he'll take it back again."

"It's like giving a boy half a crown and telling him not to spend it," said Kaimes, looking round. "If we only could! It's a jolly sort of room this, and we'd get a good rent for the house."

The room was indeed pretty, being decorated in a Pompadour manner. Its walls were adorned with white paper, sprinkled with bunches of roses tied with fluttering blue ribbons, and the carpet bore the same dainty design. The furniture was of white wood, upholstered in brocade, also diversified with roses and azure streamers. There were many delicate water-colour pictures, a grate and fire-irons of polished brass, and electric lights in rose-tinted globes. Even the grey December light streaming in through the two windows could not make the apartment look anything but clean, and delicate, and dainty, and delightful. It was an ideal nest for a young couple. But this one had outlived the honeymoon, and cared very little for the ideal.

"A very pretty room," said Jim, again; "and you're the prettiest thing in it, Leah."

She looked at him scornfully, and then glanced around. "I hate all this frippery" she said contemptuously. "Something more massive would suit me better."

"Well, you are a kind of Cleopatra, y' know."

If Jim's historical knowledge had been more accurate, he would have made a better comparison. Cleopatra, according to the latest discoveries, was small, foxy-haired, and dainty. She would have suited this Watteau-like room to perfection. But Lady Jim was as tall as any daughter of the gods, and bore herself after the imperial style of Juno, Queen of Olympus. Her hair was of a deep red, and she had a great quantity, as those who saw her pose in charity tableaux knew very well. Leah possessed the creamy complexion which usually

goes with such hair, and a pair of large blue eyes, out of which her soul had never peered. They were hard eyes, shallow as those of a bird, and surveyed the world and its denizens with the inquiring expression of a cat on the look-out for titbits. Her lips were thin, and covered admirably white and regular teeth. It was a clever face, and beautiful in its serene immobility. Those who did not like Lady Jim called her a cat; but she was more like a sleek, dangerous pantheress, and woe to the victim who came under her claws. Yet she could purr very prettily on occasions.

"Well, Jim," she said more graciously, for she was sufficiently a woman to be pleased with her husband's grudging compliments. "Now that you have finished saying sweet things, what next?"

"This business. We're on the----"

"Jim, if you say that again I'll leave you to get out of the trouble yourself. You're my husband. Think of something."

"I can't--unless it's the insurance."

"The insurance," said Leah, thoughtfully; "twenty thousand pounds, isn't it, Jim?"

Her husband nodded. "Old Jarvey Peel, my godfather, had my life insured when I was a child, and arranged that his heirs should pay up the money every year to keep it in force. Then there's accumulations of sorts. I don't understand these stale things myself, Leah, but I know that there's over twenty thousand."

"Can't you raise money on it?"

"No; the old man arranged that I should lose it if I tried that game. Lord," said Jim, with disgust, "if I could have raised money I should have got rid of it, ages ago."

"But how does it benefit you?" asked his wife, curiously; "if the money is paid when you are dead, you won't have any fun. But I"--her eyes gleamed.

"Oh no, you don't," snapped Jim, not at all pleased at this hint; "you'd like to turn me into cash in that way, I know. But it so happens that the twenty thousand, and whatever additions may have come, will be paid to me when I'm sixty. Much fun

in that, when I shan't have teeth to crack nuts."

"You're over thirty now, Jim."

"Thirty-five, and you're only five years younger; so when we get the cash at sixty there won't be any enjoyment left for either of us."

"Thirty-five from sixty," murmured Lady Jim. "Leaves how much, Jim?"

"Twenty-five," replied Kaimes, after wrinkling his brow and communing with his none too quick brain. "Beastly long time to wait."

Leah nodded. "There's no chance of your getting it sooner?"

"Not the slightest. I can't get a cent on it, and I can't sell it, and I can't use it in any way. Jarvey Peel was a silly old ass. Died worth no end of coin, and didn't leave me a penny."

"But if you died, Jim?"

"Drop it," retorted Kaimes, who did not at all relish the suggestion.

"Well, but supposing you did?" insisted Leah.

"Then I 'spose the money would be paid to you," said Jim, kicking the hearth-rug with a gloomy face; "but don't you make any mistake, Leah. I'm goin' to live right on to sixty and handle the money. I can't do much at that age, but I'll try hard to get through the lot before I slip off."

"And what about me?"

"Oh, you must look after yourself," said Jim, heartlessly; "but if you can think of some scheme to get the cash now, I'll give you half--there now. There's nothing mean about me."

"What's the use of talking rubbish?" said Lady Jim, crossly; "you won't die."

"Not to oblige you, my dear, so don't think it."

"Then don't let us talk any more of the impossible."

"Is it impossible?" asked Kaimes, cunningly.

Leah looked at him with wide, bright eyes. "What is it?" she asked.

"I might *pretend* to die, you know," said Jim, looking at her very directly; "then the cash 'ud be paid to you, and we could share."

"But it's ridiculous," cried Leah, raising her eyebrows; "you would have to give up your position and disappear."

"Who cares? You know I never stop longer in England than I can help. As to my position, it's all debts and duns, and squabbling with you. Oh, I'd give up the whole thing for the money!"

"You never think of me."

"Got enough to do to think of myself," grumbled Kaimes; "'sides, you don't care for me. As a widow you could have lots of fun on--on, say--five thousand."

"That's right, Jim, take the lion's share to yourself."

"Well, shouldn't I be paying the largest price for getting the cash?"

Leah shrugged her shoulders again. "There would be very little sacrifice in it so far as you are concerned," she said. "You've been three times to South America since we were married, and I presume with this money you would go there again."

"I'd go out of your life for ever."

"Oh, well," she said coolly; "I could show my respect to your memory by wearing a widow's dress. I expect I should look rather nice in a cap."

Lord Jim was rather disgusted. Little as he loved his wife, he expected her to be devotedly attached to him, and her ready acquiescence in his disappearance annoyed him greatly.

"You've got no heart."

"How clever of you to guess that! I gave it to you five years ago."

"And took it back before the honeymoon was over."

"Well, you see, Jim, you are so careless a man that I could not think of leaving the only heart I possess in your hands. Besides, so many women have given you their hearts that I thought you might confuse the lot."

Lord Jim did not like this banter, and said so in a few forcible words. Then he moved to the door, casting a disgusted look at a pile of bills on Leah's side of the table.

"What about this truck?"

"Oh, we'll pay them out of your insurance," laughed Lady Jim.

"Not much. I'm not going to disappear and give up everything for the benefit of a lot of measly tradesmen."

"I wish you wouldn't dangle grapes out of my reach," said his wife, pettishly; "you know it's not to be done."

Jim plunged forward, and, gathering up the mass of papers, threw them into the fire. "Pay them in this way, then," said he, enraged.

"I wish I could," sighed Leah, wearily, and looked at herself in the mirror. "Do stop worrying me, Jim. I'm getting to look quite old. Are you going out?"

"Yes. We've wasted an hour in talking about nothing. We're on the rocks, I tell you."

"And so," said Lady Jim, calmly, "you end where you began."

Jim looked up to heaven. "And this is a wife!" said he, plaintively.

"And this," she mocked, laying her hand on his shoulder, "is a probable bankrupt!"

"Not me. I'll clear out first to South America."

"Leave the insurance money to me, Jim," called Leah, as he banged the door.

"Twenty thousand pounds," she soliloquised--"it's worth trying for. But I might

as well cry for the moon;" and she sighed, the sigh of selfishness, unexpectedly thwarted.

CHAPTER II

Lord And Lady Jim Kaimes were regarded as a most agreeable couple, and utilised this reputation to live on their friends. The husband was an admirable shot, a daring and judicious polo-player, and his skill at cards was as notable as his dexterity in golfing. Consequently, he was much in request, and benefited largely in free board and lodging. He was good-looking, which pleased the women, and good-natured, which satisfied the men. In wrestling and boxing Jim could more than hold his own, and always paid his gambling debts, even at the cost of allowing tradesmen to threaten legal proceedings. Thus, according to modern ideas, he was an honourable man and a good all-round sportsman, a credit to the British aristocracy and a pleasure to his numerous friends. "These be thy gods, O Israel!" A clergyman once preached on this text in Jim's accidental hearing, but Jim did not know what he meant.

The wife was a general favourite with the men, but women fought rather shy of her. She thought too much of herself, they said, and dressed altogether too well; and, moreover, never gave even the most bitter-tongued female a chance of talking scandal in connection with the honoured name to which Jim had called her attention. However, feminine artfulness led one and all to conceal this dislike, and Lady Jim received as much kissing and as many sweet words and invitations as her vain, hungry soul desired. She saw through the wiles of her own sex clearly, and knew that in nine cases out of ten the woman who kissed would have preferred to bite. But they knew that Lady Jim knew, and Lady Jim knew that they knew she knew, so everything went well. As to what was said behind her back Lady Jim cared not a snap of her fingers, and if any rival dared to attack her openly she was quite able to use a particularly venomous tongue,

the safeguard against calumny which Nature had given her. And it must be said that she never went out of her way to harm any one: her position was that of a passive resister. As she pathetically observed, she was a contented woman, if only permitted to have her own way.

Certainly the women had cause to complain of Lady Jim's gowns, which were far beyond the ordinary female intellect in cut and fashion, in new material and up-to-date trimmings. She added her own ingenuity and taste to the creations of the dressmaker, and the result was always such a triumph as to lead the rest of her sex to doubt if Providence existed. It would have been even more aggravating than it was, had it been known that Lady Jim paid next to nothing for her gowns, and advertised the dressmaker instead of settling the bill. But Leah did not make this fact public. She was content to use her magnificent figure and good looks, and her popularity in society, to save a lean purse, and therefore was daily and nightly clad in the purple and fine linen which wrung envious tears from other women's eyes. Sometimes Lady Jim, fascinating a society-paper editor, would utilise his columns and circulation to advertise deserving tradesmen: while from these, in return, she exacted tangible gratitude in the welcome shape of gloves, handkerchiefs, scents, and similar needful if expensive commodities. Lady Jim never signed her name to these literary efforts, but they drew custom to the shop and filled her wardrobe with what she wanted at the moment, so she was not ambitious to be known as an authoress. Even Jim never knew how his wife, as he put it, "contrived the tip-top;" and privately thought that the age of miracles was not yet past, when Leah could make something out of nothing.

For five years, more or less, Lady Jim had been clothed as the lilies of the field, and had been supplied with nutriment by the lineal descendants of Elijah's ravens; but now things were coming to a crisis. The long lane down which she had marched as Solomon-in-all-his-glory was about to take a turning, and Lady Jim did not relish the new route. It led to second-rate lodgings at home or abroad, to the lack of frocks and a diminution of other women's envy, to the loss of a thousand and one luxuries which had become necessities, and to a self-denying ordinance of which she did not approve. Something must be done to prevent the necessity of turning down this penurious alley, but when Lady Jim set out on her shopping excursion she did not very well see how she could avoid the almost inevitable.

Needless to say, Leah had a trifle more in her purse than the one sovereign she had admitted the existence of to Jim. To be precise, she possessed ten pounds, and that had to last a week as pocket-money. She felt very hard up as she stepped into her motor-car and whirled down the street. Had she possessed the lamp of Aladdin she would have made its slave bankrupt; and to think that seven days of desiring pretty things should be supported on ten pounds! The beggar at the gate of Dives could not have been poorer.

But there was no sign of penury on the surface. The unpaid sables Lady Jim wore were the best that the animal could give; the fur rug over her feet had cost enough to keep a poor family for six months in food and fire, though she, or rather Jim, was being dunned for the payment of that; the motor-car was one of the best and newest, and Lady Jim drove it with the reckless speed of a woman who thinks the world was created so that she should play Juggernaut. Having plenty of courage, and a love for playing with death, Leah was a daring and skilful driver. Before now she had swept round a corner with two wheels beating the air. But she had not as yet crushed any one under the said wheels, and she ascribed this luck to her peacock's feather. Like all who have small belief in the Deity, Lady Jim was superstitious in a small way. Her fetish was a peacock's feather, and so long as she had one about her, nothing, so she averred, could possibly go wrong. There was one now thrust into the left-hand lamp of the car, and the panels were painted with the same feathers, until they resembled the tail of Juno's favourite bird. Lady Jim might forget to go to church, or to say her prayers, or to thank God, but she never forgot the necessary peacock's feather which was to ensure prosperity and safety. She was reported to make genuflections before a shrine of this sort, but the report was probably exaggerated. No one knew what kind of a Baal she worshipped, but it is ridiculous to say that she did not adore at least one, for she was, in her way, a very religious woman.

Lady Jim raced her car out of Curzon Street, down Park Lane, and into Piccadilly, where she amused herself with dodging nervous people and shaving the wheels of vehicles drawn by humble quadrupeds. The chauffeur sat grimly silent, expecting an almost certain spill, with the calm of a fatalist. He knew it would come some day, in spite of his mistress's skilful driving, but he neither worried nor remonstrated. He was paid for a silent tongue and healthy nerves, and if his life *was* insured rather heavily, considering his profession, that was no one's business but his wife's, and she had already decided how to spend the insurance money. But the woman need not have been so sure of such good

fortune. Lady Jim did not mind hurting other people, but she had an uncommonly good notion of how to preserve the only neck she possessed.

When the car reached Bond Street, Lady Jim, who was as calm as though she had finished a donkey-ride, stepped down and entered a jeweller's shop. Lately she had paid a trifle off his bill, and thought herself entitled to double the gross amount. The jeweller, knowing the Duke of Pentland had fifty thousand a year, and that Lady Jim was too pretty a daughter-in-law not to get her own way with so gay an old nobleman, did not object to his customer's purchases. If Lady Jim could not pay the Duke would, so she was permitted to take away several objects for which she had no use. Then she went to select some new hats, and look at the latest thing in frocks. A call at certain other establishments resulted in the car being heaped with expensive trifles for Christmas presents. Afterwards the car whirled into Oxford Street, returned to Piccadilly, and stopped every now and then like a bird of prey. At some shops she was received with sickly smiles; at others, which she favoured for the first time with her custom, with rejoicing grins: but out of every place Lady Jim walked calmly, with a shopman in the rear bringing parcels to increase the baggage on the car. She achieved the whole afternoon's work without once opening her purse. Could Rothschild have financed things better?

At five o'clock, with lighted lamps and unabated speed, Lady Jim drove her machine to Berkeley Square, and, leaving the chauffeur to choke and shiver in the damp fog, walked into a dull-looking house to see her godmother, Lady Canvey. She wished to ask the advice of that kindly, shrewd old pagan, and was not at all pleased when she found the Rev. Lionel Kaimes, trying to lead Lady Canvey in the right way. He had been trying to guide her heavenward for the last year, but the bright-eyed old dame still danced along the primrose path with nimble feet and an appreciation of the agreeable people who were dancing along with her to perdition.

"Well, my dear," said Lady Canvey, submitting her withered cheek to a conventional kiss. "Lionel, here, has been speaking of the devil, and you appear. There's some truth in proverbs, it seems."

"Oh, Lady Canvey," sighed a soft voice at the old pagan's elbow.

"I forgot, Leah, this is my 'Philip you-are-but-mortal' companion. You have not met her before, and I don't think you'll seek her company again. She's not quite

your sort, my dear, not quite your sort. Joan, come and show yourself."

In response to this order a slim, tall girl, with a serious face, came forward shyly, and put out a timid hand. She was plainly dressed in a black stuff gown, without colour or ornament. Her hands and feet were slim and small; she had wavy brown hair twisted into a loose knot at the nape of her neck, and the features of her somewhat pale face were delicately shaped. On the whole an uncommonly pretty girl, Lady Jim decided, after taking in all this at a glance, but less seriousness and brighter smiles would improve her looks. She was like Pygmalion's statue before the goddess had flushed its cold whiteness with rosy blood.

"How are you?" asked Leah, nodding in a friendly way, but without shaking hands. "You are one of Lady Canvey's discoveries, I suppose."

"My discovery," put in Lionel, cheerfully, and with a proud glance at the white-rose beauty of the girl. "Lady Canvey wanted a companion, and I brought her----"

"One of Fra Angelico's saints," finished Lady Jim, who was honest enough to confess inwardly that this ethereal loveliness was most attractive.

"Quite so," chuckled Lady Canvey, arranging many costly rings on a pair of knuckly hands. "Lionel knows how I enjoy the company of a saint."

"You must put up with a sinner for the time being," said Lady Jim, good-humouredly. "I have come to talk business."

"That means you intend to worry me," grumbled Lady Canvey, with a sharp glance from under her bushy eyebrows. "I hate being worried and bored."

"Oh, I shan't bore you."

"Yes, you will. Other people's affairs always bore me. I am not like his reverence here," and she waved her ebony cane towards the young curate, who laughed cheerfully.

"I admit there is some lack of resemblance," assented Lady Jim, dryly.

Then she looked from the young man to the old woman. Lionel was her husband's cousin, and should death make a clean sweep of the Duke, and Frith and Jim, he would inherit the title and the fifty thousand a year which Lady Jim coveted. This possibility, which it must be admitted was sufficiently remote, did not make Leah love the young man any the more. Besides, he was what she called "goody-goody," which meant that he had entered the service of his Master for use and not for show. As the curate of an exacting vicar in a Lambeth parish, he grubbed amongst the dirty poor, and dispensed soup, soap, shelter, and salvation. Rarely did Lionel come to the West End, as his task lay amongst the poor and lowly; but when he did venture into high places he always called on Lady Canvey, who had an odd kind of affection for him. "He's misguided, but genuine, my love," said the pagan, "and moreover, he amuses me!" which last statement amply accounted for the favour with which the old lady regarded him. Lionel was rather like Jim, tall and muscular and handsome. But his face had an intelligent look which Leah had never beheld in the dull visage of her husband, and his blue eyes had the bright, calm gaze of one whose faith is certain. He affected the usual clerical garb, but being only twenty-five, and boyish at that, his face wore a genial, cheerful, unworried expression, which made most people open their hearts. Like a doctor, a clergyman must have a good bedside manner, and this Lionel possessed. Moreover, his heart was kindly, and he was quick to observe the snubbed and neglected. This feeling drew him towards Joan, who had retreated, colouring painfully, when Lady Jim substituted a nod for a handshake. The girl was busy with a silver teapot, egg-shell china, and hot cakes, and presently handed a cup to the visitor. Lady Jim took it somewhat absently, and having satisfied herself with Lionel's looks and personality, turned her eyes on Lady Canvey.

Outwardly the old dame resembled the godmother of a fairy story, and would have been admirably suited to the pointed cap and scarlet cloak of a professed witch. Yet the remains of beauty lingered about her wrinkled face, recalling exciting Crimean days when she had been a belle. She was small and shrunken and bent, and sometimes her grey head shook with palsy. But her spirit was still vigorous and her brain clear, as could be seen by the steadiness of her piercing black eyes, diamond-bright and clear. She wore a lace cap, a dress of silvery grey satin, and many jewels costly but old-fashioned. Add to these a white China-crape shawl and an ebony cane, and behold the portrait of the lady known as the "cleverest old harridan in town." But that description was given by an enemy. Lady Canvey had a quick brain and a sharp tongue, yet her heart was as kindly as that of Lionel. Perhaps it was this which drew the young and old

together.

The room was comfortable, and luxuriously furnished, but with the ugly taste of the Early Victorian epoch. Lady Canvey, now over eighty, clung to the decorations and colours which had been fashionable when she was young, and on stepping into the room Lady Jim felt as though she had slipped back to the time of the Great Exhibition. The motor-car outside, and the old lady in the red velvet armchair, represented widely-severed eras. And even Joan the saint and Lionel the curate seemed alien to the world Lady Jim inhabited. For that world closely resembled the one Noah had fled from into the ark, when the denizens "were eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage"--though, to be sure, marriage nowadays, save as a visible sign of respectability, was not much considered.

"Well, godmother," said Lady Jim, thinking to curry favour with this she-Cr[oe]sus by using an approved, if somewhat obsolete, address, "you are looking well."

"Then I'm a living lie," retorted Lady Canvey, grimly. "How can you expect me to look well, when Lionel here has been quoting texts for want of originality?"

"I wanted you to hear the scripture," protested Lionel.

"That's *your* business," replied Lady Canvey, stirring her tea; "but I can hear the scriptures read when I please by Joan, who has a much sweeter voice than you, young man, as I suppose you think;" and she gave one of her dry chuckles.

The curate reddened, and Joan looked confused. Lady Jim, glancing from one serious face to the other, drew her own conclusions, and murmured something about a "sealed fountain." Lady Canvey, not being versed in biblical imagery, did not understand, but Lionel comprehended on the instant.

"I am glad to hear that you read your Bible, Lady James," he said quickly.

Leah hated to be addressed in this stiff manner; yet it seemed appropriate to the out-of-date room. But she had no desire to quarrel with her godmother's pet in the presence of that opulent lady, so she turned the tables on Lionel by looking shocked. "Of course I do. I am not a pagan."

"Then I must be one," snapped Lady Canvey; "for I wouldn't be you, Leah Kaimes, for the heaven I don't expect to go to."

"Hush! hush!" said Lionel, pained by this flippancy coming from those withered lips.

Lady Jim glanced at her opulent beauty in a dim mirror, framed in tarnished gold, and laughed softly. Her godmother saw the look and was swift to interpret its meaning.

"I was like that once," she said, in rather a quavering voice, "and you'll come to be such as I am, only you'll never wear so well. Oh, what an arm I had!" and she began to weep silently over her lost beauty.

While Lionel and Joan comforted the poor soul, Leah looked sympathetic but gave no assistance. She decided that Lady Canvey was in her dotage, and would be the more easily dealt with on that account. Her one desire, therefore, was to get rid of the two unnecessary people and begin operations at once. She hoped by skilful management to come away with a considerable cheque in Lady Canvey's shaky handwriting. Those drivelling tears meant a weak will, and that, to one of Leah's determination, meant money.

"About this business," she began, when the old woman was again her cheerful, cynical self: "could you spare me ten minutes, godmother?"

"Certainly, my dear. It's all I *can* spare you."

This was not a promising beginning, but Lady Jim knew she would not walk off with the spoils without a sharp brush for their gaining. She looked at Lionel, and then at the girl, whom she was sure in her own heart the curate loved.

"Have you ever heard Mr. Kaimes talk Chinese metaphysics, Miss Tallentire?" she asked Joan, having possessed herself of the companion's surname.

"No," said Joan, opening her violet eyes widely. "I am not clever enough to understand."

"Ask Mr. Kaimes if he doesn't think you are clever enough."

"Really, Lady James----"

"Lionel," interrupted Lady Canvey, sharply, "go into the conservatory with Joan. She will show you a new dwarf oak which I lately bought. Leah will entertain me. And I'm pretty sure," chuckled she, "that I shall entertain Leah."

"She's going to be nasty," thought Lady Jim, with a charming smile, and continued to smile until the curate and his unsuspecting companion went to see the dwarf oak and to talk Chinese metaphysics, which Leah was certain they would do. Lionel, with a defiant glance at his cousin, and with a colour which made him look unexpectedly handsome, followed Joan out of the stuffy room. When the door was closed, and the fire was unnecessarily poked up, and Lady Canvey was comfortably settled in her chair, after a word or two about the draughts which no one but herself could feel in that close atmosphere, Lady Jim waited patiently for her godmother to begin the battle.

She had not long to wait. Lady Canvey's eyes were bright, and Lady Canvey's spirit reared like a warhorse to plunge down on Leah. She sniffed once or twice, and looked sharply at the beautiful, smiling face. Then she delivered herself of a speech which put Lady Jim's late behaviour in a nutshell.

"Leah," said Lady Canvey, "you're a born cat."

CHAPTER III

Lady Jim was not at all offended. She made every allowance for the querulous temper of old age, and still smiled.

"I rather like cats myself," she observed casually. "They know what they want."

"But they don't always get it, my dear," snapped Lady Canvey; adding inconsequently, "when the cat's in the dairy, she's after the cream."

"I don't think that's an original remark," said Leah, languidly, and loosening her furs, for the room really was heated like the conservatory, in which the lovers talked Chinese metaphysics. "Didn't George Eliot say something of the sort?"

"I never knew him," retorted Lady Canvey, wilfully dense. "You and your Chinese metaphysics indeed! I won't have it----"

"Have them," corrected Leah, gently, and unable to resist the opportunity.

Lady Canvey scowled like the fairy Caraboss, and continued, without heeding the impertinence, "Joan is the daughter of Lionel's vicar."

"I see, and he intends to be the vicar's son-in-law."

"What is that to you?"

"News!" expressed Lady Jim, serenely. "I never knew such a prig as Lionel could fall in love."

"His love is the love of an honest man," declared the old dame, striking her crutch on the carpet.

"I hope so, for the sake of his cloth."

"Chinese metaphysics indeed!" grumbled Lady Canvey. "The poor child did not know what you meant."

"She certainly seems to be somewhat dull."

"Dull yourself, Leah. She's a sweet-tempered, good, thoughtful girl."

"Oh, I didn't mean to say she was so dull as all those qualities imply," said Lady Jim, sweetly.

Lady Canvey looked wrathfully round for something to throw at her visitor's head. But the tea-table was too far away, and the old woman prized her cups and saucers. Finally she took refuge in a spiteful speech.

"*She's* an honest girl."

"I sincerely hope so, seeing she is your companion," replied Leah, not caring to take up so ridiculous a challenge. "When did you start her?"

"Leah!" Lady Canvey thumped the ground again. "Don't talk slang. If you wish to know, although I don't think it is any of your business, Joan Tallentire came to me two months ago, during which time you have not come to see me."

"I was abroad," apologised Lady Jim, stifling a yawn.

"Gambling at Monte Carlo, I'll be bound."

"I did meet Jim there. He lost heavily on the red. I won, and came home with enough to see me through the last month."

"Who were you living on abroad?" asked the old woman, contemptuously.

Lady Jim leaned back and placed her muff-chain between two very red lips.

"Let me think," she murmured, not put out in the least. "Oh, that little dowdy Australian woman, who is trying to get into society on her husband's money, asked me to stop at their villa."

"And you did?"

"For four weeks."

"And borrowed money, I'll be bound."

Lady Jim nodded blandly. "You can't expect me to live with pigs for nothing," she said, with the greatest coolness.

"You'd live with the devil and borrow from him, I believe," cried the exasperated Lady Canvey, glaring.

"I *do* live with one," assented her god-daughter; "but he's a stony-broke devil."

"More modern flowers of speech!"

"I didn't create the language."

"You can help using it."

"No. People wouldn't understand if I talked like Lady Jane Grey or Elizabeth Fry."

"They were good women."

"But so dull," objected Lady Jim. "Why is it good women are always dull and dowdy?"

"They are getting ready for the next world," mumbled Lady Canvey, solemnly.

"Their outfit can't cost much, then," declared Leah, flippantly; "but aren't we going to talk business? Think of that poor French, sitting in the motor-car all this time."

"You're sorry for him, I'm sure," said the old woman, ironically.

"Horribly," replied Lady Jim, calmly; "but at least the poor creature is cooler than I am. This room is stifling."

"Don't call your fellow-sinner a creature, Leah."

"Ah! Even had I not seen Lionel I could guess he had been with you, godmother. He loves the dirty and disreputable."

"And you love the rich and disreputable."

"That obvious speech is hardly worthy of your reputation," was Lady Jim's reply. Then she crossed her legs, rested her muff on her knee, and protested, "I can't wait here much longer----"

"On account of French?"

"No; but I'm going to dine at the Cecil to-night, with a boy in the Lancers. He's a nice boy."

"And a rich boy?"

"Of course! I don't like boys without money. But this business," she went on hurriedly. "Jim and I are in a hole."

"You ought to be in gaol," was the angry reply.

"That *would* be a hole," said Leah, good-humouredly; "but you don't want to see Jim and me in the bankruptcy court."

"Why should I bother? It's nothing to do with me!"

"I'm your god-daughter."

"You're a heartless cat," said Lady Canvey, angrily, and with her eyes scintillating like jewels. "It's no use, Leah. I've helped you and that rascal Jim over and over again. Apply to the Duke."

"Oh, we've done that. He won't give us a penny."

"Then ask some of those nice boys you talk of."

Lady Jim sat very upright in her chair, and a becoming colour heightened her beauty.

"I don't ask any men for money," she declared; "you know perfectly well, Lady Canvey, that I am any honest woman."

"And how dull that sounds," chuckled Lady Canvey, turning the tables; "you should be more original, Leah."

"I don't mind going out to dinner with a man," cried Lady Jim, feeling herself much aggrieved, "nor do I mind a box at the theatre, or some gloves or things of that sort, so long as Jim doesn't object."

"Pooh! Much you care for Jim."

"I do. Jim's got a temper. He told me this very morning he'd screw my neck if I broke loose."

"Then I respect him for saying it," said Lady Canvey, energetically; "and I'd respect him still more if he did it."

"That's what I said to him," retorted Leah, grimly. "All the same, I am straight enough. No one can say a word against me."

"I'm glad to hear it. You have your good points, Leah," observed Lady Canvey, in a more kindly tone; "but you show your worst side to the world. Why not turn over a new leaf?"

"I'm just about to do so, and there's bankruptcy on the other side, unless you help us, dear godmother," she ended coaxingly.

"I won't," was the firm response. "It's like pouring water into a sieve. I've given you and Jim at least five thousand pounds. Where is it, I ask--where?"

"We must pay our bills."

"You ought to, but you don't."

"Money will go."

"In ways it shouldn't go," snapped the old woman, feeling herself mistress of the situation. "Don't talk nonsense to me, Leah. You and that rascal are a couple of spendthrifts. The Duke, bless him, started you both with a good home and a good income, and now----"

"Now we're on the rocks, as Jim cleverly puts it," said Leah, who could not help seeing the humour of the dilemma. "You didn't think Jim was so original, did you, godmother?"

"Leah, you're impossible!"

"I'm sure I don't know why you should say that," remonstrated Lady Jim. "I must keep up my position."

"It's not as if you had been expensively brought up," went on Lady Canvey, unheeding. "Your father was a wasteful pauper, for he got precious little off that estate of his in Buckinghamshire."

"And what he did get went into his own pocket," said Lady Jim, supplementing the family history; "but as my mother was dead, and I was his only daughter, he might have treated me better."

"Geoffrey Wain was like yourself, Leah--a hard-hearted, selfish----"

"Oh, spare me these adjectives," interrupted Lady Jim, rising. "My father is dead, so there's nothing more to say. If you can't help me, at least you needn't call me names."

"I beg your pardon," said Lady Canvey, very politely. "As I don't intend to give you a shilling, I have no right to tell you what I think of your doings. Will you ring the bell, please? I want Joan."

When Lady Canvey took this tone Leah knew well that the case was hopeless. In spite of senile weeping, it appeared that the old woman was not so easily beguiled as might have been expected. There seemed nothing for it but to leave in silence; but remembering how desperate was the position, Lady Jim refrained from ringing the bell and made a last appeal--this time on business grounds.

"If you will give me a thousand pounds for six months," she proposed, "my husband and I will pay it back with interest."

"And the security, my dear?"

"Our joint names," said Leah, with dignity.

"Ring the bell," was all the answer that Lady Canvey vouchsafed to this proposal; "and goodnight, my dear."

Lady Jim recognised that she was beaten, and nothing remained, but to retire with dignity. Pressing the button of the bell, she crossed to Lady Canvey and kissed her withered cheek with a caressing smile. "I am so pleased to see you looking so well," she said gently; "but I see signs of failing in your conversation."

"You won't see any signs of lending," was the grim response. "Oh, here you are, Joan," as that young lady entered the room with Lionel at her heels. "Send these people away, and read me a chapter out of that new novel which came yesterday."

"Goodnight," said Lionel, bending over the old lady, and kissing her hand with the tenderness of a son.

She twitched it away. "There--there--goodnight. Take Leah to that miserable creature who is perishing in her motor-car, and don't make love to her. She is one

of those women who are a crown to their husbands."

Lady Jim did not wait to hear the old woman's chuckle as she fired this last shot, but swept out of the room, smiling kindly on Miss Tallentire. The curate followed her, and Leah began to consider what use she could make of him to farther her plans.

"Let me drive you to Lambeth," she said, while arranging her sables at the door.

Lionel laughed. "Lambeth would be shocked to see me arrive at my lodgings in such an up-to-date style," said he, pulling up the collar of his coat. "No, thank you, Lady James. I'll walk for a time, and then take a Westminster Bridge 'bus.'"

"No, you won't," she contradicted, in an imperious tone. "I wish to talk to you. Come, get in. French, you can go home."

"But the car, my lady?"

"I'll look to that. Do as you're told."

Looking rather apprehensively at the machine, which was humming and shaking in the bitter cold, French touched his cap and moved away. Leah stepped lightly in, and beckoned to Lionel with one hand, while she gripped the steering-wheel with the other.

"Come along."

The curate did not display much eagerness to come. "Is it safe?" he asked; "you've sent the man away."

"Because I want to talk privately with you. Safe!" she echoed in a tone of impatient scorn; "I'd drive a car against Edge himself."

"Oh, very well," said Kaimes, carelessly, and placed himself beside her. He was utterly devoid of fear, and if there was to be a smash, he was not unprepared to enter the next world. Lady Jim gave the wheel a twirl, and the car glided through the square under the grey muffling of the fog. Reckless as she was, Lady Jim had to steer carefully and move slowly, lest she should run into something, for the fog was a trifle thicker than it had been during the afternoon. All the same, her keen eyes could see clearly enough, and she was not at all afraid. Cool under all

circumstances, Lady Jim would have hummed a ditty on the streaming bridge of a plunging, bucking tramp-steamer, going down in the bitter North Atlantic weather. Lionel marvelled at her composure, and wondered if even her dear intellect could grasp the meaning of death and its hereafter. But Lady Jim was thinking of this world rather than of the next, and talked of her troubles while steering the car down Piccadilly.

"Jim and I are in a hole about money," she announced abruptly, for there was no need to be diplomatic with this simpleton.

"That is not unusual," murmured Lionel.

She laughed and nodded. "No. We have both a wonderful capacity for getting through cash. Now we've got down to what an American girl called the bed-rock, and we want help."

"I never knew you when you did not want help," said the curate, wondering what was best to say; "and in some ways, your want is very dire."

"Don't preach, Lionel. Money is better than sermons."

"To such as you and Jim, no doubt. But setting aside the spiritual need, a sermon on your extravagance would do you good."

"I'm afraid not," rejoined Lady Jim, putting on the brake for the St. James's Street incline; "it would only go in at one ear and out of the other. When I want sermons I'll come and hear you preach in that dirty little church of yours. Meantime, you must help to get Jim and me out of this scrape."

Lionel was annoyed by her reference to his church, but from experience he knew it was worse than useless to argue with Lady Jim. "I cannot help you," he said stiffly; "you know my small means."

"Bless the man, I don't mean you to put your hand in your pocket. I am quite aware that the clergy are better at asking than at giving."

"You have no right to say that," remonstrated Kaimes, warmly. "We help the poor and needy."

"In that case you have now a chance of practising what you preach."

Lady Jim negotiated Cockspur Street and felt her way along Trafalgar Square in the hope of hitting Whitehall. Only when the car was buzzing down that thoroughfare did Lionel speak.

"I am sitting in a most expensive machine," he said, indignantly, "swathed in a costly rug, and beside a woman with a fortune on her back in the way of clothes."

"Then you ought to be very happy," said Leah, calmly; "but I'll drop you at Lambeth soon, and then you can get back to the mud and rags, which you seem to prefer."

"My meaning is, that if you were poor you could not afford these luxuries."

"Nonsense. It is only poor people who *can* afford them. The rich make their money by self-denial, and wearing clothes which don't fit, in houses furnished with the riff-raff of auction-rooms. Jim and I have been brought up to better things."

"To better worldly things," corrected Lionel, bitterly.

"And very pleasant they are, my dear man."

"It is people such as you and your husband who make the poor discontented," insisted the curate.

"I'm sure I don't see why the poor should be," murmured Lady Jim, vaguely; "there are lots of shelters and soup-kitchens and workhouses. And I always put ten shillings into the plate on Hospital Sunday, not to speak of the way in which I've danced and sung at performances--got up to help people who don't need the money so much as I do."

"Nero fiddling, while Rome burned."

"Well, and what else could the poor man have done?" retorted Leah. "There were no fire-brigades in those days, were there?"

Lionel felt helpless. "You don't understand!"

"Oh yes, I do. You mean to be nasty. If I were a vindictive woman I would drop you into the river, car and all"--they were crossing Westminster Bridge by this time--"but I always like to be nice. Being nasty brings wrinkles, and makes one so old. But about our trouble," she went on, determined to have her own way. "Lady Canvey won't help us, and no one else either. There's the Duke----"

"He has done enough for you."

"Not at all," Lady Jim assured him coolly. "He's kept us on bread and water--that's all."

"Oh!" Lionel was shocked at this ungrateful speech. "And you prefer *pâté de foie gras* and champagne?"

"Naturally! Not that I like *pâté de foie gras*. They torture the geese to get it, I believe, and it seems cruel to eat it."

"You have a tender heart," said Kaimes, sarcastically.

"It has been my ruin. But this trouble----" She harked back again to the one subject which occupied her thoughts. "Will you see the Duke, and ask him to

give us--say--er--er--well, two thousand pounds?"

"No, I won't. You'll only waste it."

"That's so like you parsons," said Lady Jim snappishly: "we ask for bread, and you give us a stone."

"Two thousand pounds' worth of bread is a trifle too much to ask for."

"Not at all, I always ask for twice what I hope to get. But here we are on the other side of the water. I can't take the machine into your dirty little slums. Get down."

Lionel did so, and stepped on to the pavement. "Thank you for the drive," said he, lifting his soft hat.

Lady Jim nodded vaguely. "Won't you speak to the Duke?"

Kaimes hesitated. He did not wish to appear churlish; yet it seemed useless to interfere. "The Duke is very independent," he explained; "I don't think he'll listen to me."

"Oh yes, he will. You're a parson, and he is old enough to be afraid of the next world. Tell him we're cleaned out, and get Jim and me a thousand. And I tell you what," added Leah, generously. "If you do, I'll give you a ten-pound note for your charities, though I don't believe in helping paupers myself."

"Yet you ask help on that ground."

"Oh, I mean the unwashed paupers you're so fond of."

Lionel ruminated. "Do you and Jim go down to Firmingham for Christmas?"

"Yes. It will be horribly dull. The Duke is so fond of that old-fashioned Dickens Christmas, with its holly and mistletoe rubbish; but we must keep in with him. What of it?"

"Why not explain your position, and----?"

"Oh, we've explained it a dozen times. But the Duke doesn't seem to understand. Now, you can put the thing to him nicely."

"Well," said the curate, slowly. "I go to Firmingham at Christmas to preach, so I'll speak to the Duke."

"You're a brick," cried Lady Jim, holding out her hand. "I'll come and hear you preach when we're in Firmingham."

"I hope it will do you good," said Lionel, shaking hands. "You think me a prig, Lady James, but I assure you----"

"I know you do," said Leah, dreading further sermons; "but I must get home to dress. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," echoed Lionel, hopelessly, and saw the car glide away into the fog between the lines of blurred lights. "Poor woman!" he thought, turning towards his lodgings. "How terribly sad her spiritual position is! I trust she will get home safely, seeing she is so worldly."

He need not have troubled. Lady Jim reached Curzon Street in safety, and in very good spirits. Did not a peacock's feather adorn one of the motor-car lamps?

CHAPTER IV

Firmingham was the smallest of the Duke of Pentland's country seats, and so cosy, that he invariably held his Christmas revels there, in preference to dispensing Yule-tide hospitality in more splendid mansions. Situated in a woody and elevated part of Essex--that county presumed to be a fog-tormented puddle--the quaint Georgian house was ideal in itself, and in the repose and charm of its

surroundings.

Ugly it probably was when erected, but time had mellowed its glaring walls of red brick, and nature had draped them with hangings of dark green ivy. The square, lofty house, with its freestone ornamentation, its many windows and gigantic porch, stood on a slight rise, a position which enhanced its noble proportions. On three sides, level with the ground floor, extended broad greystone terraces, with shallow steps leading downward to smooth lawns. These, stretching for a considerable distance, terminated in flower-beds, now devoid of blossom and colour. And lawns, house, and flower-gardens were girdled by pines and oaks, sycamore-trees and elms, with noble examples of the birch, the beech, and cedars, proud and tall. A wide, straight avenue ran for a quarter of a mile through grim firs to ornate iron gates swinging between massive stone pillars, surmounted by the ducal arms. And these same gates gave entrance to a spacious and wild park, as delightful as that "wood near Athens" where Oberon tricked Titania.

The charming country outside this sacred enclosure appealed to artists in search of the picturesque. Certainly, the landscape was domestic and tame, for here nature yielded to the controlling hand of man. But the pleasant walks, the deep lanes, the ancient villages, and the comfortable farmhouses, sprinkled thickly for miles, made, in conjunction, a pretty picture of rural peace and contentment. And the contentment was genuine, for no better or more considerate landlord than the Duke existed. He was popular in the neighbourhood, and his sway almost imperial--a true king of the castle.

Jim and his wife drove from the station in quite a Darby and Joan style, and, through fear of the Duke, rather than in compliment to the season, were prepared to enact the parts of man and wife to perfection. It was rather hard for Leah to say pretty things to Jim in public, and for Jim to hover anxiously round Leah as a lover-like husband; but the Duke expected such behaviour, and they were astute enough not to disappoint him. In his rough tweeds, with jovial looks and hearty words, Jim was quite the English squire of the story-book, and shook hands with some of his father's tenants who haunted the local station in quite the "all-men-are-brothers" style. Leah also dispensed smiles and nods to marvelling villagers, who stared open-mouthed at her beauty. But in the comfortable brougham, Jim folded his arms and lapsed into sulky silence, and Leah yawned and looked out of the window for want of something better to do. They were off the stage now, and could take their ease.

Very wintry looked the landscape through which they passed. The meadow-lands were deep in snow, and gaunt, leafless trees started like black spectres from the milky ground. Ponds and ditches wore masks of darkly-green ice, and the frozen road rang like iron under the hoofs of the horses. A yellowish sky, with the promise of almost immediate snow, lowered over the starving world, and, for lack of foliage, the landscape widened to the observing eye. A dull crimson in the west showed that the sun was sinking in foggy splendour. The shrill voices of children, singing music-hall songs instead of carols, saluted their ears.

"Quite like a Christmas card, isn't it, Jim?"

"If it wasn't for the music-hall songs," assented her husband, looking out of his window. "Wonder if there'll be skatin'."

"I daresay. I hope so. I love skating."

"'Cause you can show off."

"We have each our little vanities, Jim," said Lady Jim, whom hope made good-humoured. "There's the church--what a pretty old building, and how well the snow contrasts with the red roof and the ivy!"

"We have to go there on Christmas Day," gloomed Kaimes.

"We must show an example to the lower orders," explained Leah, in her British-matron tone. "Besides, Lionel preaches."

"How awful! Why has the Duke put him in the bill?"

"Mr. Dane, the vicar, is ill, and asked Lionel to fill the pulpit. The Duke has nothing to do with it."

"Wish I had," grumbled Jim. "I'd have the sermon cut out."

"You'd have the church turned into a music-hall, I daresay," retorted his wife, contemptuously. "But you must be as nice as you know how to Lionel. Remember, he promised to speak to the Duke."

"I'll keep awake during his sermon, but I shan't promise to do more, Leah. You're runnin' this show."

"Quite so, but I don't want you to spoil it. Lionel has great influence with the Duke."

"Frightens the old man to death with texts and Tophet, I expect," said Jim, crossly. "I know these parsons."

"I was not aware that your circle of friends included such respectable acquaintances."

"Oh, I can hold a candle to a certain person as well as you, Leah. Who do we meet at Firmingham?"

"The usual dull lot," said Lady Jim, with a yawn. "Frith and his stupid little wife, who seems to model herself on David Copperfield's Dora. Then Lady Canvey, with her new companion, is sure to be present."

"Fancy havin' that death's-head at a Christmas feast. Who else, Leah?"

"That little Russian doctor, Demetrius. We met him at the Embassy, if you remember. Not the Russian Embassy, but the French. He's out of favour with the Czar, and dare not leave England in case he should be sent to Siberia."

"He can practise for it here," said Jim, shivering, "Beastly cold, isn't it, Leah? What's Demetrius doin' here?"

"Looking after the Duke's health. He says he can cure his gout."

"I hope he will," muttered Kaimes, devoutly. "For if Frith comes along we shan't get a shillin'!"

"I'm half afraid we shan't get one now," sighed Lady Jim. "Here's the avenue. What a charming place!"

"I'd let it out on buildin' leases, if I had it," remarked the prosaic Jim, "an' cut the timber. Lot of money in those trees."

"Don't look into jewellers' windows, Jim. You're not rich enough to buy the stock."

"Rich! It was as much as I could do to scrape enough together for our tickets."

"Ah, well," said Leah, reassuringly, as the wheels scrunched the frozen snow before the great porch, "we needn't spend anything here, except half a crown for the plate."

"Catch me wastin' money in that way," snapped Kaimes, swinging himself out to help his wife to alight. "Halloa, here's old Colley, lookin' like a dean as usual;" and Jim, again assuming his hearty manner and jovial leer, shook hands with the butler, whom he had known since Etonian days.

The house-party was composed of hostile elements; consequently, every one was compelled to adopt a forced air of Christmas peace and good-will, which rather tried jumpy nerves. The Duke dug up fossilised cousins to participate in the festive season, and these did not suit with some fashionable folk, who for various reasons, as they put it, "had to be nice to the dear old Duke." Mr. Jaffray and his poetic sister of fifty, who quarrelled incessantly, hardly suited the tastes of Mrs. Penworthy, as a daughter of the horse-leech and intensely up-to-date. Nor did Graham, the Little England politician, enjoy the company of Lord Sargon, a Tory, and a believer in the divine right of the last legal descendant of the Stuarts. Also, the various young women and men, who were really nobodies, and fancied themselves somebodies, found the parts they were expected to take in an old-fashioned Christmas rather a bore.

"The season of peace and good-will," explained the Duke, after dinner, when this collection of smartness and do wellness embellished the great drawing-room. "We must all love one another."

The company assented conventionally, and every one smiled violently on every one, to the amusement of Lady Canvey. "If this was the Palace of Truth," she announced, "there would be trouble."

"But the mellowing influence of the time----"

"Just so, Duke. But some people are like certain pears, they won't mellow--they only become sleepy. And that reminds me," she added, looking round for Joan. "I'll go to bed soon."

"Not on Christmas Eve," urged the Duke, bending over her chair. "We intend to keep Yule-tide as our ancestors did--snap-dragon, the mummers, the Christmas-tree, the carol-singers, and the ghost-stories."

"Not one of them clever enough to tell a real ghost story," snapped Lady Canvey, cynically examining faces old and young, made up and natural.

"Oh, I know a lovely, lovely tale," said Miss Jaffray, who was gowned girlishly in white, trimmed oddly with ivy, and who looked like a ruin.

"That will last till to-morrow morning," chimed in her brother, seeing an opportunity of being nasty; "snap-dragon is more fun. Eh, Lady Frith--you used to enjoy that once."

"I do so now--dear snap-dragon," said the Marchioness, who was sentimental and adored her tall lean husband; "but the Christmas-tree--oh, that is too sweet. Bunny and I met for the first time under a Christmas-tree, and he fell in love with me. Didn't you, Bunny?"

It was rather hard on Lord Frith that he should be addressed by this most inappropriate name. He was as stiff as a Spaniard, sad in his looks, and spoke little. Although eminently well-bred, and clever in a political way, he was not a genial personage. In this he differed from his father, for the Duke was stout and kindly looking, beaming with good-humour, and quite the style of host who would have figured in Sir Roger de Coverley's time. Report said that he had been much too gay in his youth, and that the late Duchess had put up with a great deal. Lady Canvey could have related stories about the Duke likely to be much more entertaining than the proposed ghost-tales. But she was fond of her host, who, like herself, was a link with the remote past, and never told stories out of school. When she and the Duke got together, they wagged their old heads over dead and done-with scandals, and lamented these days of vulgar and blatant sin. But whatever their pasts may have been, they were an ideal couple in the way of venerable looks and sweet old age. Quite a Philemon and Baucis of modern times.

Meantime, "Bunny" scowled on his frivolous little wife, and then gave her a sentimental smile. He was always torn between love and propriety, for Lady Frith, imitating Dora, as Lady Jim averred, said the most exasperating things in a sweet treble. He used to lecture her in private and explain what she should say; but these corrections always ended in tears on the part of the child-wife, and in complete surrender on the part of her doting husband. Lady Frith certainly could play her part in society excellently well on occasions, and was more shrewd than would have been guessed from her baby face and infantile manners. But she

wanted to be original, and therefore plagiarised from Dickens' novel. This assumption of an imaginary character she called "possessing a personality."

Mrs. Penworthy was old wine in a new bottle: that is, she looked twenty-five, and acted like an experienced coquette of double the age. Married to a modern Job, called Freddy, whose meekness was proverbial, she led him about like a pet lamb and taught him a few parlor tricks, so that people might say, "What an attached couple;" which they did, tongue in cheek. A sweet look from Mrs. Penworthy warmed Freddy's heart for four and twenty hours, even though the cost of the merest glance sometimes ran into double figures. In his hours of leisure, which were few, he frequently told her that she was an angel; but the expression did not sound so agreeable on Freddy's lips, as on those of the half dozen nice boys who constituted her court.

She went everywhere and knew everyone, and did the things she ought not to have done, with discretion. Freddy thought her a playful kitten, quite blind to the fact that she had grown rapidly into a cat. But with smiling looks and sheathed claws, and Freddy's diamonds on her neck, she was a very pretty cat, and blinked sleepily at those who admired her, so long as Freddy gave her a silken cushion to rest on and plenty of cream to drink. Moreover, she only scratched those who could not scratch back.

"I really think it's awful fun," said Mrs. Penworthy to her court--"all this sort of thing, you know--holly and snow and----"

"And mistletoe," suggested one of the nice boys.

"Now if you talk like that, Algy, you shan't be spoken to for a week."

"A look is enough for me," whispered the adoring Algy.

"Naughty! What would Freddy say?"

Lady Canvey's sharp ears overheard the banter. "Were I Freddy I know what I'd say," she murmured grimly; then aloud, to spoil sport, "Is your husband here, Mrs. Penworthy?"

"Freddy? Oh, dear me, no. He's gone to Paris, or Peru, or--I forget exactly where--but it's something beginning with a 'P.' Dear Freddy," she laid an entirely useless fan on her lips, pensively, "he works so very, very hard."

"And quite right too," said Lady Canvey, bluntly, "seeing what a devoted wife he has."

"Ah, you don't know how Freddy tries me, dear Lady Canvey. I *am* devoted--that I am. But, you see, I took Freddy for better or worse."

"Oh no," corrected the old woman, tartly; "you took the better, and Freddy took the worse."

Mrs. Penworthy, not being ready with an answer, murmured something about "jealous old thing," and moved away with her court to where Lord Sargon was holding forth on his pet craze. "If only our ancient kings were back," he said, but not too loud, as the Duke might have disapproved of the disloyalty, "Christmas would be Christmas. In the good old times of the blessed martyr Charles----"

"The bad old times," contradicted Mr. Graham; "it was then that our beloved country began to annex places which are useless. Let us give up everything beyond the Channel, and attend to our own country. Then, indeed, Christmas will be Christmas."

"And the parish pump will pour forth beer," said Mr. Jaffray, referring to the badge of the Little Englander.

"Ah, the conduits ran wine in those sweet old days," sighed his sister, in her poetic vein.

"And people never washed," said a truculent old gentleman given to sanitation. "What I say is, let every house have a bath-room."

"I say, Jim, is this going to last for ever?" asked Leah, considerably bored by these intellectual fireworks.

"A week, anyhow," replied Jim, who was feeling happy after a large dinner; "but if you will come to the Zoo, Leah, you mustn't find fault with th' animals."

"They are scarcely so interesting."

"Oh! Animals don't talk, I 'spose you mean."

"You do," retorted Lady Jim, calmly. "There's Demetrius!" and she left her husband in the clutches of Mrs. Penworthy, with a whispered caution. "Don't let her go too far, Jim. This week we're the respectable middle-class pair, who live in slate-roofed houses."

Jim did not quite understand, but he vaguely guessed that he was to keep Mrs. Penworthy at a distance. For some minutes he did this, but she soon overcame his scruples, and begged him to take her to the picture gallery. The discreet court did not follow.

Constantine Demetrius was a small, dark, neat man with an ivory complexion, black hair, a waxed moustache, and a stereotyped smile. He was dressed perfectly in a foreign fashion, and placed his small feet together when he made his bow to Lady Jim. His English was much better than his morals, and perhaps this was why Lady Jim beckoned him to her side. Demetrius was one of her most ardent admirers, and she had a vague idea of making use of him. At present she did not see how to utilise his services, but if ever she required a thoroughly unscrupulous man, she knew that she would need him. Besides, he was really a clever doctor, and when Lady Jim was ill, she felt it would hasten the cure to think she was being attended to for nothing.

"What do you think of all this?" she asked him, when they were snugly bestowed in a cosy corner.

"It is very English," said the Russian, with a shrug.

"That means very dull!"

Demetrius clicked his heels together and made a bow from the middle of his body. "At present I cannot say so," said he, gallantly.

"And you wouldn't, if you thought so!"

"Madam, the truth to a ravishing woman----"

"Is like sunshine to a coal-miner: we get it so rarely. By the way, how is Mademoiselle Aksakoff?"

"She is well."

"And as pretty as ever?"

"I see nothing of beauty but what is before me."

"All the same, you will leave me and marry Mademoiselle Aksakoff."

Demetrius looked at Lady Jim with such fire in his dark eyes that she felt slightly uncomfortable in spite of her courageous nature. It was easy to play with the hearts of phlegmatic Englishmen, but to amuse herself with this fiery Slav was like trifling with a tiger. Nevertheless, Lady Jim, with a view to future contingencies, allured him with sweet looks, and tantalised him with half-granted favours. Katinka Aksakoff, the daughter of a Russian official attached to the Embassy, loved Demetrius even to the extent of helping him to escape the lures of the secret police, which would have drawn him to the Continent, *en route* for Siberia. Therefore she hated Lady Jim, because that astute diplomatist kept Demetrius dangling at her skirts in the bonds of a never-to-be-requited love, on the chance that some day she might require him. And the Russian knew that Leah Kaimes was a woman who wanted all for nothing, but, if possible, he intended to make his own bargain with her. Lady Jim was clever, but Demetrius thought he could entangle her.

"Monsieur Demetrius," she said after a pause, during which the fire died out of the Russian's eyes, "if you wanted money----"

"I would get it," said he, determinedly.

"But if you saw no way of getting it?"

"I would make the way."

"You can't make bricks without straw."

"Clever people can," replied Demetrius, dryly.

Lady Jim looked down at her rings.

"Are you clever?" she asked.

"To benefit some people I might be," he said in a low voice.

She stared straight before her, and noted that Lionel was chatting with Miss Tallentire. As yet the curate had not spoken with the Duke, so that was a quarter yet to be tried. Nevertheless, Lady Jim had a shrewd idea, in spite of the comedy being played by herself and Jim, and of Lionel's pleading, that the Duke would be adamant. It behoved her to have another string to her bow, and this she could find in Demetrius. But she did not know yet to what use she could put him. It was impossible to ask him to sway the Duke, strong as his influence was with that gouty nobleman. Lady Jim had a good deal of what she called pride, and did not intend to let Demetrius know her true position, if she could help it.

Before she could say anything, and really she did not know what to say, the Duke gave the signal for the commencement of the Christmas festivities. These were strong in intention, but weak in execution. The company burnt their fingers over snap-dragon, capered in Sir Roger de Coverley, tempted the Fates with roasting chestnuts, and finally adjourned to a large hall, where glittered a splendid Christmas-tree.

Then danced in the mummers, villagers all, tricked out as Robin Hood and Maid Marian, as the Terrible Turk, Santa Claus, St. George and the Dragon--a most meek beast--and with hordes of merry, laughing children. The Christmas-tree dropped its costly, many-coloured fruits into expectant laps, and a chorus of praise hymned the munificence of the gratified Duke. Even Lady Jim thanked him for the dainty gold-net purse which she received, and if she did peep in slyly to see whether it was lined with a cheque or a bank-note, that was only out of compliment to her father-in-law's known generosity.

"Santa Claus has not got a banking account," she murmured to her husband.

Jim, who was scowling at his gift,--a set of sleeve-links enamelled with the four vices--women, cards, drink, and racing,--growled.

"He's got a dashed lot of impertinence. As if I'd wear these things!"

"No," said Leah, tickled by the implied rebuke, "it doesn't do to wear your heart on your sleeve--links": a witticism which was entirely lost on Jim. He was one of the many obtuse swine who trampled on Leah's pearls.

What with eating and drinking, and professing seasonable sentiments which certainly did not come from the heart, everyone became bored and bilious and fractious. Leah surveyed the yawning revellers with a feeling that Christmas, old

style, was a failure.

"You can't arrange an orgy," was her comment to Lady Canvey, "it must come by chance, to be successful."

"I don't think Pentland intended anything so disreputable," retorted the old dame, "consequently you are disappointed."

"Bored," Lady Jim assured her. "I suppose it's eating plum pudding which always makes me dull."

"But not good-natured."

"My digestion has its limits. Good night, godmother; I suppose it's time for you to be taken to pieces," and having stricken Lady Canvey dumb with rage, she slipped away to bed, wondering what would happen before next Christmas.

"Something must be done," she thought, wearily climbing the stairs. "If Lionel fails with the Duke, Demetrius might----"

Might what? She did not know. But she really did feel that something might be done with Demetrius.

CHAPTER V

A congregation drawn to the Church of All Angels, by various inducements, filled it to overflowing the next morning. Some came because it was Christmas Day, others to hear Lionel Kaimes preach; many desired to see the ducal party, and one or two presented themselves in God's house to thank Him for the gift of His Son, sent to save a dying world. Knowing the Duke's old age impeccability,

nearly all his guests were present and filled three large pews, to the wondering awe of the villagers and their wives. These last, especially, were distracted by the splendour of the ladies' dresses, and the variety of the new fashions. Many laudable imitations of those marvellous frocks were visible in country lane and village street before Easter.

Lady Jim and her husband discreetly sat in the body of the church, some distance from the pulpit, as Leah did not wish to come under the curate's eye. She thought he was quite capable of preaching at her, in which case a natural resentment would have led to a quarrel, prejudicial to the exercise of Lionel's good offices with the Duke. Moreover, Leah, occupied with her own thoughts, did not want to be distracted by a sermon of religious platitudes. She stood up and sat down mechanically, looking too flamboyant to be in harmony with the simplicity of the building. Tucked into the opening of her "Incroyable" coat, claret-coloured and with strikingly large buttons, she wore a cup-shaped nosegay of white and pink orchids. Her hat was large, with many feathers of the new Titian red, and resembled nothing in nature. She did not wear jewellery, but the vivid colours of her dress made up for the absence of gems. There was something tropical about Leah, and in that chill grey church she glowed like a gorgeous flower, all splendour and perfume and radiant vitality. Her exuberant beauty and colour attracted even the attention of Jim. He bent forward, when the prayer for the King's Majesty was being said:

"I believe you're enjoyin' it," muttered Jim, resentfully.

"H-sh-s-s-s!" breathed Leah, devoutly, and knelt in a saintly attitude which was far from expressing her real feelings. For the moment she did not pray herself, or think of the prayer that was being offered. Her thoughts were busy with bills and duns and Jim's defects, and the chances that Demetrius might prove useful. And when she did murmur a prayer, it was one of those which are rarely answered, or, if answered, turn to the confusion of the suppliant. Plenty of money, no trouble, much enjoyment, and the destruction of her enemies, were the elements which composed this remarkable petition. Lady Jim was not very clear as to whom she was asking, but she had a vague feeling, which she mistook for religion, that there might be Some One who could give her what she required. Moreover, it was just as well to be on the safe side. Yet, even as she tried the experiment, the earthly superstition asserted itself, and she carefully fingered a peacock's feather inside her muff. This serving of God and a fetish may seem ridiculous in a woman of Leah's capacity. Nevertheless, she devoutly believed

that if the unseen Deity did not help her, the seen Baal would. And after all, was there not a cat of Heine's acquaintance, who made genuflections before a pink-ribboned flageolet? But cats, as the poet remarks, are so superstitious. And Leah the pantheress was of the feline tribe.

Having made herself safe with the Unknown, Lady Jim joined in the ensuing hymn bravely. She thought the words dreary and the tune barbarous, but the fervour of her deep contralto voice reached the Duke's ears, and he gave her an approving glance; so that was something gained. Leah would have gone through the whole collection of Ancient and Modern to learn the precise meaning of that look, but she was satisfied with guessing, and sat down cheerfully to be bored with the sermon. It occurred to her that the prayer had been heard, and would probably be granted. But whether by the peacock's feather, or the Deity of whom Lionel now began to speak, she could not determine.

"And His name shall be called Wonderful"--this was the curate's text, and he discoursed on it in a simple and impressive way. Speaking of the birth of Christ, of His teaching and plan of salvation, of His self-denying life and unwearying kindness, the young man's grave and tender periods shamed the most inattentive into thoughtfulness. Lionel was not a born orator, but he was very much in earnest, and preached with an emphasis which carried undeniable conviction. Mrs. Penworthy felt suddenly virtuous, and resolved to repeat as much of the sermon as she could remember to Freddy, so that he might not grumble so much over what the silly thing called "her extravagance." Even Lady Canvey wagged her aged head, and thought that she might help a few deserving paupers, if their needs could be supplied in moderation. Leah herself was impressed, to the extent of hoping that the Duke would see that it behoved him to fill the empty pockets of a deserving and pretty daughter-in-law. Jim would have approved of this sentiment, but all the time he was fast asleep, and woke up cross when she pinched him to rise for the Doxology.

Beyond a stray sentence here and there, Leah had not paid much attention: she had heard it all before, though some of the sentiments were new, and, as she thought, ridiculous. When the preacher was fairly started she relapsed into her own thoughts. These being unpleasant, she permitted her hard eyes to wander round the church. After a wondering gaze at the extraordinary fashions of the women, and a patronising examination of the decorations, she caught sight of a face belonging to a young man on the other side of the aisle. He was so like Jim that she involuntarily turned to see if her husband still slumbered placidly by her

side. The double was dressed in grey tweeds and looked almost like a gentleman. He stooped a trifle, in spite of his square shoulders and stalwart figure, and every now and then coughed painfully. Apparently he was ill with some pulmonary complaint, which the freezing atmosphere of the church accentuated. Leah wondered at the resemblance, and thought of certain traditionary stories concerning the youthful days of the Duke. But after a second glance she decided that perhaps there was nothing in it. Jim was of a pink-and-white, bovine, commonplace type, and there were hundreds like him in manners and morals and looks. Moreover, she was so weary of seeing Jim's inane face over the breakfast-cups that she did not care to gaze at the imitation. Nevertheless, being a woman with the orthodox share of Eve's curiosity, she resolved to ask questions about this consumptive double. Mrs. Arthur, the Firmingham housekeeper, could doubtless tell some story, as she knew much more about the Duke than had ever appeared, even in the most scurrilous society paper. And Lady Jim knew how to make her talk.

When the plate circled, Leah quadrupled Jim's half-crown, and he did not approve when the piece of gold jingled amongst the silver.

"You've been borrowin'," Jim accused her in an angry whisper.

"Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow," sang Leah, without replying; and put her whole heart and voice into the hymn in the hope that some of the blessings might trickle her way. And why not, seeing that she had baited her hook with a sprat to catch the much-needed mackerel? But it was useless to explain this to Jim. He would not have understood such lavish fishing.

"It was really too lovely," Mrs. Penworthy assured the Duke at luncheon. "Mr. Kaimes spoke just the things I feel. And the decorations--oh, really--so very tasteful. But the mistletoe, Duke. I don't think there should have been mistletoe round the pulpit."

"Such an immoral plant," chimed in Lady Canvey, with sharp, twinkling eyes; "and so useless to some people, who can dispense with it as an excuse. I daresay the Druids were no better than they should have been."

"They were before my time," said Mrs. Penworthy, very prettily; "and you must have been quite a child then, dear Lady Canvey."

The sermon affected Lady Frith in another fashion.

"Oh, dear Bunny," she said to her saturnine husband, "what a lovely way Lionel puts things! Do let us help people. There's Leah, you know----"

"Exactly," assented Frith, dryly. "I do know, and for that reason I don't intend to waste money in that direction."

"But Lionel talked of aiding the poor and needy."

"That doesn't include the extravagant and ungrateful," retorted her lord. "You are an unsophisticated child, Hilda."

"Oh, Bunny, how could you call poor Leah and her husband names? We must love every one at this season."

"Oh, I'll love them as much as you please; but not to the extent of supporting them."

Plainly there was nothing to be got out of Frith, as Lady Jim decided when the Marchioness reported a part of this conversation later in the day. But she attempted to soften the Marquis by saying things which she knew the child-wife would babble again to her hard-hearted husband.

"Jim and I don't want money, dear," she said, kissing Lady Frith; "so long as Frith is nice to us, we don't care. You have your position to keep up, and we are nothing. But it was sweet of you to speak."

"Oh no," prattled Hilda, in her childish way. "I want every one to love me, ever so much."

"I am sure they do. Isn't Frith jealous?"

"As nearly jealous as a perfect man can be."

"I thought perfect men had no imperfection," retorted Lady Jim, ironically; "but it's all right, dear," another kiss--"we must bear our cross, as Lionel said this morning. Now I must go to see old Mrs. Arthur. One must be good to one's inferiors."

The result of this conversation was, that Lady Frith told her husband of Leah's pointedly correct humbleness; whereat the marquis laughed shortly. He quite

understood Lady Jim's tactics, and was resolved that they should not succeed. Frith was one of the few men Lady Jim had never fascinated, and she hated to be under his clear-sighted gaze. If Hilda could have heard Leah's inward remarks as she proceeded to the housekeeper's room, she would scarcely have given so favourable a report.

"Good day, Mrs. Arthur," said Lady Jim, to the old-fashioned dame in the black silk and lace cap, who rose to drop a prim curtsy. "I have come to wish you the compliments of the season."

"Thank you, my lady. Won't you be seated?"

Lady Jim selected the most comfortable chair in the quaint small room, and graciously requested the housekeeper to resume her seat. Then she asked about Mrs. Arthur's cough, and her sailor son, and her married daughter, and after various other things in which she did not feel the least interest. The old woman, much impressed with Leah's condescension, and not sufficiently clever to see through her arts, expanded like a winter rose in this aristocratic sunshine. In a few minutes she was chatting quite at her ease, and with the discursive garrulousness of old age. This was the unguarded mood Leah desired for the satisfaction of her curiosity, and having created it by an appearance of the deepest interest in Mrs. Arthur's domestic small-beer chronicles, she proceeded to take advantage of the opportunity.

"The service was delightful this morning," she observed; "the decorations were charming and the congregation so attentive. I suppose you know every one in the village, Mrs. Arthur."

"I ought to, my lady. I am Firmingham bred and born."

"And a very good representative of the place," said Leah, kindly. "The villagers are really quite nice-looking--especially the men."

"If you saw my son----"

"Was he in church this morning?" asked Lady Jim, who knew very well that the young man was with his ship in Chinese waters. "I saw rather a handsome young fellow in one of the pews, but he looked ill. Of course, I thought him handsome," she went on carelessly, and with a soft laugh: "he was the image of my husband."

Mrs. Arthur looked rather nervous. "There is only one young man hereabouts who resembles Lord James," she observed, "and I do not wonder you saw the likeness, my lady. Harold Garth is like Lord James now, and is such as his Grace was in his youth."

"Oh!" Leah's eyes opened. "Do you mean to say----?"

"Nothing, my lady--nothing;" and Mrs. Arthur's hands fiddled nervously with the gold chain she wore round her neck. Then, woman-like, she went on to contradict herself. "Harold Garth has lately returned from Canada, where he went to farm."

"Garth? I seem to know the name!"

"I don't know who can have mentioned it to you, my lady. He is the only Garth in the district, and I daresay you never saw him before."

"Well, no; I must admit that I never have. Why?"

"Canada," explained Mrs. Arthur, vaguely. "He has been there for the last twenty years. He went out to make money, at the age of fifteen."

"And has apparently returned with consumption."

"Yes, poor lad; but the Duke is very kind to him."

Lady Jim laughed meaningly. "Oh, the Duke is very kind to him, is he? That's so like the Duke. Always thoughtful. Fifteen and twenty--he is about thirty-five."

"More or less, my lady."

"My husband's age," said Lady Jim, pointedly. "Yes, my lady," assented Mrs. Arthur, closing her lips firmly.

Leah tried another question. "Why doesn't this young man's family keep him instead of letting the Duke support him?"

"Harold Garth has no family, my lady. His mother is dead."

"And his father?"

Mrs. Arthur looked down. "I know nothing about his father," she said in low tones. "Harold is a lonely man, poor soul. He lives at the Pentland Arms, and Mrs. Kibby, the landlady, is as kind to him as though he were her own son. And his Grace--bless him--does all he can to smooth Harold's way to the grave. He sent that foreign doctor to----"

"Demetrius," said Lady Jim, quickly. "Oh, so Demetrius knows him?"

"Yes, my lady. He thinks he can cure him of this consumption. I do not think so myself" proceeded Mrs. Arthur, garrulously, "for Harold is booked for death. You can see it in his face. I believe his Grace wants him to go to a warmer climate."

"What a deep interest the Duke takes in this man!"

Mrs. Arthur looked up suddenly, and a flush dyed her withered cheek. The eyes of the two women met, and the situation was adjusted without words. After that interchange of glances Leah knew, as well as if Mrs. Arthur had explained at length, that Harold had ducal blood in his veins. "And that is why he is so like Jim," she thought, rising to go. "I hope the poor fellow will get well," she said aloud; "but really, he was foolish to venture into that cold church."

"I don't think he minds if he is dead or alive, my lady. He has no friends."

"Oh yes, the Duke----"

"Certainly his Grace, who is a friend to all," said Mrs. Arthur loyally.

Lady Jim laughed, and went away. She had learned all she wished to learn, but, beyond satisfying a passing curiosity, had no desire to pursue the subject. Still, she thought it would amuse her to ask Demetrius a few questions concerning this patient, and went in search of him. Somehow the subject of Harold Garth and his resemblance to Jim took hold of her imagination, and she could not put it out of her head. While she was thinking of other matters, the thought of the strange likeness--now fully accounted for--would slip in, and she would find herself pondering. Afterwards she declared that this insistence of a passing thought was the work of Providence, for so she called the peacock-feather Baal she served.

Demetrius was not in the house, having been called out to see some one who was ill in the village. So Lionel assured her, and moreover supplied her with the

name of the patient. "It's a young fellow called Harold Garth," he said gravely; "he foolishly came to church this morning, and, being already ill, is worse from having ventured out."

"I never heard a parson call going to church foolishness before," said Lady Jim, surprised that the subject should crop up again in so unexpected a manner. "Who is Harold Garth?"

"A protégé of the Duke's. He has just returned from Canada," said the curate, simply; "and, curiously enough, he is rather like the Kaimes family. Perhaps that is why the Duke is so kind to him."

"Perhaps it is," said Leah, wondering how much Lionel guessed. "I don't think I ever saw him," she added, mendaciously.

"If you did you would mistake him for your husband."

"How awful!" shuddered Leah. "As though one Jim wasn't enough to be bothered with. But can't we talk of something more interesting--your sermon, for instance?"

"I trust you found that interesting," said Lionel, smiling.

"Oh yes--it wasn't too long."

"I see"--dryly--"you judge the interest of a sermon by its length."

"Oh no--really, I quite enjoyed your preaching."

"I don't preach that people may enjoy, but that they may think seriously of what they are."

"I'm sure I think seriously enough, Lionel. Have you spoken to the Duke? No? I wish you would."

"To-morrow. This is Christmas Day, remember."

"As if I could forget, with all the nonsense that's going on here," retorted Lady Jim, glancing superciliously round at the decorations. "Every one is overdoing the brotherly business. I quite expected my maid to tell me that she loved me."

And I don't see why you shouldn't ask the Duke to-day. You'll squeeze the money out of him the more easily while he's got this Christmassy emotion on."

"I don't squeeze money out of people," said Kaimes, stiffly.

"What a large income you must have, then."

"I live within it."

"That's nothing to boast of. I'd live within mine, if I had ten thousand a year."

"I doubt it," replied Lionel, who could not help laughing at her coolness; "you'd spend fifty thousand if you had it."

"Rather--if I were the Duchess of Pentland. But there's no chance of such luck. Frith's too healthy. Do smile again, Lionel--you've got such nice teeth, and look quite a good sort when you let yourself go."

"What am I to smile at?" asked the curate, with deliberate austerity.

"At me, and on me. I put ten shillings into the plate this morning."

Lionel was a thoroughly good young man, and had a great sense of the dignity of his cloth and the responsibility of his position. But he also possessed humour, and could not help retorting after the style of a certain witty bishop.

"That's the smallest fire insurance I ever heard of," said he, genially, and moved away, leaving Lady Jim amused.

"I didn't think he had so much fun in him," she thought, making for the library; "but the speech is too clever to be original"--which showed that Leah suspected the existence of the witty bishop.

But the word insurance put her mind on Jim's mad idea to pretend death and cheat the company out of twenty thousand pounds, with accumulations. Leah devoutly wished that the trick could be managed. Its success meant a clearance of debt and of Jim, when the millennium would come, and, as Mrs. Nickleby's admirer put it, "all would be gas and gaiters." She resolved to have another chat with Jim on the subject, and meantime went to seek for a novel. After boring herself with Mrs. Arthur and Lionel, she wished to read away a well-earned hour

of peace.

But this for the moment she was not destined to enjoy. The library was empty, save for the presence of the last person whom Lady Jim wished to encounter. When Miss Jaffray looked up from a gigantic volume with an almost toothless smile, Leah turned to fly. But the old maid arrested her flight with a joyful shout. She usually did shout, as her brother was slightly deaf, which deceived her into thinking the entire human race was likewise afflicted.

"So sweet of you to come here," shouted Miss Jaffray. "I am just dying for some one to talk to."

If the decision had been left to Lady Jim, she would have gladly avoided the talk, to bring about this result. But it occurred to her scheming mind that this dull spinster was wealthy, and might be cajoled or frightened into lending money. Leah did not specify the sum, even in her own mind, as she did not know how much more this virgin soil would yield, if properly worked. Sitting down promptly, she began to chat on the first subject that came into her head.

"What are you reading so earnestly?" she asked sweetly.

"The *Morte d'Arthur*," said the spinster, fondling the ponderous tome which her weak knees could hardly support.

"Heavens!" thought Lady Jim, with a charming smile, meaning nothing, "am I to be bored with another Arthur?"

"The black-letter edition," went on Miss Jaffray, in a loud and oratorical voice. "Most interesting. So sweet to think of those dear dead days, when knights went about as troubadours with guitars in steel armour, dying for queens of beauty."

"Delightful," assented Lady Jim, yawning at the dullness of the picture; "but"--with a disparaging glance at the lettering--"isn't it rather like reading a German newspaper? I prefer novels myself."

"So do I, when not in a poetic humour," shouted her companion. "All the old, old masters of fiction. Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins. I love them all--every one."

"I seem to know those names," ventured Leah, carefully. "What did they write, Miss Jaffray?"

The spinster gasped. Brought up in a library, she could not understand this fashionable ignorance, which, truth to say, was partially assumed. Leah was by no means the ignoramus she made herself out to be. But, for the sake of business, she thought it judicious to foster Miss Jaffray's vanity by assuming an inferior position.

"Do you ever read?" asked Miss Jaffray, in the voice of Goliath challenging the army of Saul.

"Oh yes; society newspapers, and French novels."

"But they are so improper."

"Nothing amusing is improper to my mind," said Lady Jim, calmly; "and I really did skim through a page or two of Dickens. Horribly dull, I thought him."

"Oh!" Miss Jaffray gasped again. "He did so much good."

"Perhaps that is why his books are dull. Thoroughly good people are invariably--" Here she discreetly pulled the reins, as Miss Jaffray, considering herself good, might not relish the malicious witticism, presuming she could understand it. "I'll take you as my instructor, dear Miss Jaffray," added Leah, stifling another yawn. "Do tell me what to read."

"There's Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*," said the old maid, delighted at being put into the pulpit; "but you may think me rude for recommending that."

"Why should I?"

"There's a character in it so like you, in appearance," apologised Miss Jaffray; "in appearance only, you will understand. I should be sorry indeed to think that in morals you resembled Miss Gwilt."

"Miss--how much?"

"Gwilt. G-w-i-l-t," spelt the spinster--"the strange name of a strange woman. She's the character I spoke of. No, really you mightn't like her. She was--well--

er--er--disreputable. Better begin with *The Woman in White*."

"Oh, I have heard of that. What is it about?"

"A striking resemblance between two women. One is passed off by her wicked husband as the other, and buried--to get money, you understand--a kind of fraud."

Leah turned cold and hot. It sounded as though this simple woman was explaining the contemplated deceit of herself and Jim. "I don't think I should like that book at all," she said, diplomatically cunning; "it sounds dull. I would rather read about the naughty woman--Miss--what's-her-name?"

"It's in yonder bookshelf," said Miss Jaffray, pointing a lean finger to the end of the room, "along with the rest of the master's novels. But please don't think that I fancy you resemble Miss Gwilt's moral character. You certainly have her auburn hair."

"Red hair," corrected Lady Jim, rising. "I'm rather proud of it."

"You ought to be," said the old maid, with simple admiration, and rising to put away her tome. "I can imagine you a queen of beauty in the dear old tournaments, with knights at your feet."

"Oh, many are there now, without tournaments," said Leah, with superb self-confidence; "but I prefer men of higher rank than knights. Though I will say," she added generously, "that men who have won knighthood are cleverer than those donkeys who inherit."

All this was Greek to Miss Jaffray, and after putting away her volume she departed, with a final recommendation about Miss Gwilt. Lady Jim walked to where Wilkie Collins's novels lined the shelf, and--needless to say--selected *The Woman in White*.

"I wonder if I can make fact out of fiction?" she asked herself.

CHAPTER VI

It was Jim's custom to saunter into his wife's bedroom, before descending to make a hearty meal, and complain that he had rested badly. This was a pleasing fiction, as he slept like a dormouse, and snored steadily through the hours he allotted to sleep without even a dream. But on entering for his morning grumble, he was so surprised to find Leah in her dressing-gown before a brisk fire, with a breakfast at her elbow and a book open on her lap, that he forgot his egotism. Jim could scarcely believe his lazy eyes, for he knew well that Leah was no student.

"What's up?" he asked, after pausing at the door to say "By Jupiter!" with every appearance of surprise. "Got a headache?"

"If I had, should I cure it with a novel?" asked his wife, disdainfully.

"Don't know, I'm sure," replied Jim, with the matutinal good-humour of a healthy animal. "Doctors recommend such rum things nowadays. But it doesn't matter. I'm off to feed."

"Wait for ten minutes, Jim. I have something to say."

"You're not goin' to read, are you? I can't stand readin' on a empty stom--well, on nothin'."

"Have you ever heard of *The Woman in White*?" asked Leah, irrelevantly.

"No; who is she?"

"It's a novel."

"Don't read 'em. Real life's much more fun."

Lady Jim looked at him steadily. "We might turn this"--she touched the book lightly--"into real life."

"Goin' to make a play of it?" questioned Jim, obtusely.

"Well, you might call it a comedy," she answered. "I certainly do not want it to be a tragedy--though it might come to that," she ended in a lower tone.

Jim opened his puzzled blue eyes. "Want of breakfast, I s'pose," he ruminated, "but I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"I've passed a white night," announced his wife, abruptly.

"What's that?"

"The French expression for a wakeful night."

"But you say it in English, and how can----?"

"It's useless wasting French on a man who understands only the argot of the *trottoir*."

"You're wastin' it now. A wakeful night--eh? Why didn't you try that new sedative Demetrius gave you?"

"I didn't want to sleep. This book was too interesting. I wish you to read it;" and she extended the novel to her husband.

"What!!!" If she had offered poison Jim could not have betrayed more abhorrence. "Read? You--want--me--to--read?"

"Well, you know words of two syllables, don't you?" she retorted impatiently. "Take it."

Jim handled the book as though it were a scorpion, turning over a hundred leaves rapidly. "Love an' diaries, and--oh, bosh!"

"Not at all, unless bosh is your word for common sense. I see a chance of getting that money."

"What money?"

Leah made an impatient movement. "How dense you are! The insurance money, of course--the twenty thousand pounds. Suppose you died----"

"Stop it. I told you I wouldn't."

"And you told me that you might pretend to die."

"Oh, I was only talkin'. You don't want me to be buried alive!"

"It wouldn't be much good," said his wife, with a shrug. "We must have a genuine corpse--like you."

An inkling of her meaning stole into Jim's dull brain, and he sat down suddenly. "Go on," said he, hoarsely.

"Harold Garth is like you."

"Where the--what the--you saw him?"

"In church yesterday. He's ill with consumption, dying they say. Demetrius attends him. Supposing--supposing"--her imagination made her cheeks flush--"supposing--oh, you understand."

The sluggish comprehension of the man grasped her hinted scheme suddenly, and his eyes lighted up. "Supposing he died and was buried in place of me, you mean?"

"You don't suppose I mean murder, do you?" she cried, rising to the height of her tall figure and speaking irritably.

"You would if there was money in it," said Jim, grimly.

"It would be a natural death," went on Leah, rapidly, and pacing the room to relieve the strain on her nerves. "The poor fellow can't live long. If he died, and was buried as----"

"No go," contradicted Jim, rising in his turn. "Every one about here knows of the likeness; for which," he added slowly, "there's a reason."

"So I learned yesterday from Mrs. Arthur."

Jim was indignant. "Do you mean to tell me----?"

"I mean to tell you that I gathered the truth from what she left unsaid. You don't suppose that I require words to explain things."

"I don't see how it's to be managed," said Kaimes, reflectively.

"If it could be, would you surrender everything and----?"

"Yes, I would, for a quarter of the money. Then I'd go out of your life an' to Lima----"

"Lima," said Lady Jim, stopping suddenly. "Why to Lima? You've been there three times since we married."

"No end of a place, Lima," muttered Jim, feebly.

His wife looked at his colouring face attentively, and laughed in a short, rasping manner. An idea had occurred to her which she did not think it necessary to impart to Jim. "When you're legally dead," she said sharply, "I shall have no control over your life or movements. All I want to know is, if this business can be managed, will you do your share by disappearing?"

"Yes; but I don't see how----"

"Read that book, Jim, and you'll understand better. It gave me the idea, though our plot will be different in many ways."

"Well," said Jim, tucking the novel under his arm, "I'll dip into it."

"Don't let any one see you reading, and replace it in the library without any one knowing."

"Why should I?"

"You fool," snarled Leah, viciously; "if this thing is to be carried through safely, no suspicion must rest on either of us. Do you suppose that I have spoken to this double of yours, or have let any one know that I have read the book? I don't think it really matters much, as people are too stupid to see things; but it is just as well to be on the safe side."

"But I don't see how----" began Kaimes again, and again she cut him short.

"I do--I do. Demetrius attends this young fellow."

"Oh, and he--Demetrius, I mean----"

"Leave me to deal with him," she said confidently.

Jim flung the book on the floor, and looked at her with clenched hands. "What is this Demetrius to you?" he asked violently.

"A puppet I can pull the strings of," she retorted; "and be good enough to remember that you are not in a training-stable."

"If that beastly little Tartar----"

"My dear Jim," said his wife coolly, "if you ask me about Demetrius, I shall certainly ask you about Lima."

Kaimes was taken aback. "Lima," he stammered, flushing to the roots of his fair hair. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you can trust me to ask no questions, if you will mind your own business."

"As you are my wife, Demetrius is my business."

"Think of me as your widow then," she mocked, "and that I can't be without the aid of Demetrius."

"Why can't you speak plainly?"

"I might ask you the same question, but"--she picked up the novel and thrust it into Jim's unwilling hands--"I fancy you and I understand one another pretty well."

"I won't have any man making love to you."

"Very good," said Leah, calmly; "then you must remain a pauper, and my husband. I'm not going to all this trouble to share you with----"

"Well, with whom?--out with it!"

"I think you can answer that question best, Jim."

"Upon my honour----"

"Pah!" she said with disgust. "Hadn't we better leave honour out of this shady business we are about to embark in?"

"You really mean to----"

"I really mean to get that twenty thousand pounds!"

"You'll lose me," Jim reminded her uneasily.

Leah made a grimace. "My loss is another's gain," she said significantly. "Now go away, Jim. I have to dress in my best frock in order to fascinate Demetrius;" and she vanished into her dressing-room with a provoking laugh.

Lord Jim said something about Demetrius that involved the use of unprintable language. Then he slipped the book into the pocket of his shooting-jacket and lumbered downstairs. In spite of his squabbling with Leah, and the existence of some one in Lima, he was furiously jealous of Demetrius, and scowled at the Russian when they met. Demetrius rather liked that scowl, as he guessed the reason, and took it as a tribute to his fascinations. If he had known Lady Jim's real intentions, and that she intended to convert English rather than French fiction into everyday facts, he might not have smiled so victoriously over his coffee. But Demetrius made the fatal mistake of so many clever men: he knew he was clever, and thereby was not what he fancied himself to be. The true secret of success lies, not in knowing how clever oneself is, but how stupid other people are.

While Jim was growling over his provender, Miss Tallentire, who had finished her breakfast, slipped out of the room. She felt strange in the company of the frumps and fashionables which formed the house-party. Certainly the frumps were eating in private, and would not appear till the world was well-aired, and they had been "made-up" sufficiently well to prevent the younger generation being shocked. But the fashionable people came to breakfast in public, and Joan found the talk far above her comprehension. These languid creatures, who ate so little and talked so much, were like inhabitants of a strange planet, and it was with great relief that the girl found herself passed over. Of course, nobody thought of noticing Cinderella in her rags.

As Lady Canvey was being rehabilitated by a skilful maid, and would not be seen as the world knew her for at least two hours, Joan had this time to herself. The brightness of the day tempted her to assume hat and jacket for a morning walk, and she was shortly tripping over the crisp snow of the avenue. The glorious sunshine, the keen air, the dazzling whiteness of the snow, and the generally invigorating influence of this ideal winter morning stirred the current of her blood to nimbleness. Joan began to sing softly, and could hardly keep from dancing, so rapidly did her spirits mount skyward. At length, the place being solitary and she being recklessly young, a sudden impulse sent her flying like an arrow between the grim firs. Near the gates she shot directly into the arms of a man, and uttered an ejaculation. This was hardly to be wondered at, seeing that the arms closed tightly round her, and a pair of warm lips deepened the colour which exercise had brought to her cheeks.

"Lionel!" cried Joan; and "Darling!" replied Lionel, which sufficiently explains the feeling which existed between Lady Canvey's companion and Lady Canvey's pet.

These two babies, as the old lady called them, had been engaged for six months, but the fact was not generally known. The clerical parent of Joan had given his consent, on the understanding that Lionel was to possess a better income and the best vicarage obtainable before he made Joan Mrs. Kaimes. The young man had agreed readily enough, as he did not want to inflict his comparative penury, and poor lodgings, on the girl he so dearly loved. Joan and he had decided to wait for two years, and during that time Lionel was to reform Lambeth. He was attempting to do this with all the vigour of his energetic nature, and between times made love to Joan. Lady Canvey knew of the engagement, and would have had the couple married at once, since she could easily have given Lionel a living, and wished to do so. But the curate was anxious to become the vicar of Firmingham. The present incumbent was seriously ill, and in the event of death the Duke had promised that Lionel should fill the pulpit.

Therefore the lovers waited very happily, and if Firmingham did not come to them within the decreed two years, they were quite prepared to marry on the bread and cheese of a hard London life. Meantime, Joan was seeing a trifle of West End life under Lady Canvey's wing, and her earnings, as Lady Canvey's companion, were most acceptable to the hard-worked Mr. Tallentire and his wife. Thus it was that Joan returned Lionel's kiss, and only released herself from his loving arms when she remembered they were within sight of the lodge.

"Lionel, how can you?" she said, setting her hat straight.

"How can't I, you mean," he replied, smiling; "do you think I am as cold as the snow?"

"I don't know if you're as nice," pouted Joan, "or you would have asked me to walk with you this morning."

"No, dear," he said, gravely: "I could not have taken you to see Harold Garth. The poor fellow is too ill. But we can walk now. I have nothing to do, and--Joan, where are you going?"

"Back to the house. I won't be taken for a walk on nothing-to-do terms."

"You silly child!"

"You cruel boy!"

Then they kissed and made it up in full view of a red-breast, who cocked his head on one side and wondered why these human beings looked so pleased. Joan said "Shoo!" and he flew away to tell his wife, while the couple walked sedately through the gates, and into a world which their love created for themselves alone.

All the same, their conversation was a trifle prosaic. They read a letter which Joan had received from her mother about trouble over the Christmas gifts to the poor of the parish, and discussed this old woman who lived in a chilly garret, and that old man who dwelt like a troglodyte in a damp cellar, till the conversation became as sober as the looks of the village sexton whom they met. And he was a teetotaller.

But however enthusiastic human nature may be in the talking and doing of good works, love after all takes precedence of philanthropy, and shortly they began discussing themselves and their happiness. What they said does not matter much. Although foolish, it was sweet to them, and Joan's eyes sparkled like the icicles on the bleak hedge-rows at the looks her lover gave her. They walked in the pleasant Land of Tenderness, and down the by-lane of First Love. Joan had never seen the old French chart of that country, with its quaint names and odd geography, but neither Lionel nor herself needed its guidance. They had skimmed through the country before, and knew the lie of it extremely well.

The pair soared pretty nearly to the gates of their transcendental heaven, until the strain became too great for mere human effort, and they folded their wings of thought to drop earthward. That unfailing timepiece, the human interior, announced the hour of luncheon, and with some haste they turned homeward.

"I *am* hungry," said Lionel, ogreishly.

"Don't eat me," laughed Miss Tallentire; "you look as though you could!"

"You be Red Ridinghood and I the wolf," suggested Lionel.

"No. Do be serious, Lionel! I want you to tell me about this poor man you saw."

"Garth? Ah, he'll never see another Christmas. Consumption is wasting him to a shadow. In another three or four months----" Lionel broke off with a sigh, "Poor man!"

"Can't anything be done?" asked Joan, sympathetically.

"Everything possible is being done, Joan. The Duke is looking after Garth in every way--you know how kind he is. He even sent Demetrius to cure him, and if Demetrius can't, no one else can."

"But if he was taken to a warmer climate----"

"The end would only be retarded for a few months," interrupted the curate.

"Demetrius says there is no hope. And I don't think the poor fellow is sorry to go, Joan. He has no relatives, and few friends. I fancy he has had a lonely life."

The tears filled Joan's brown eyes. "Poor fellow!" she echoed, stealing one hand into that of her lover's. "Fancy, if we----"

"I can't fancy it with you by my side. And what is more, I don't intend to fancy it," said Lionel, hastily. "Please God, you and I have many happy and useful years before us. How do you like the Firmingham vicarage, Joan?"

"Oh, it's lovely, and such a sweet church. But I fear it's too good to be true."

"Perhaps it's not what you want," joked the curate. "If I were the Duke, now!"

"Ah, that's impossible," she laughed, amused at the idea of being a duchess; "the very idea frightens me."

"It needn't," Lionel assured her: "you will never be called upon to wear strawberry leaves, unless the Duke and Frith and Jim all go the way poor Garth is taking. And then Frith's wife may have a little Lord Firmingham. I sincerely hope so, as it would never do for Jim to be the Duke of Pentland."

"You don't like him?"

"Not passionately," said the curate, dryly.

"His wife would make a splendid duchess."

"In looks, I have no doubt. But with fifty thousand a year and a great position, she and Jim would do good to neither God nor man."

"Lady James Kaimes seems very kind," observed Joan, timidly.

"It's all seeming. Of real, true, self-sacrificing kindness she knows absolutely nothing."

"But she is so beautiful, Lionel."

"So was Jezebel, I expect."

"Oh, Lionel!"

"Oh, Joan!" he mimicked. "Don't worry your head over Lady Jim. She will always get on well in this world, though I am very doubtful about her position in the next. Come," he pointed down the incline of the lane, "I'll race you to the bottom."

"We might meet some one."

"I don't care--I'm out for a holiday;" and away flew Lionel down the snowy lane, with his clerical coattails fluttering in the wind.

Joan, girlish and simple and extremely young, sped after him, and with rosy cheeks arrived at the goal before her lover.

"Come," said the curate, wiping his heated brow, "considering I won three flat races at the 'varsity, that's not bad, Joan."

"You humbug, as if I didn't see that you let me win."

"I'll be a tyrant after marriage," said Lionel, merrily. "Enjoy your little day, my love!"

"I am enjoying this day," said Joan, as they walked rapidly towards the park gates; "but what will Lady Canvey say?"

"Pooh! What does it matter? She was young herself a century ago."

"She's a dear old woman."

"No," contradicted Lionel, critically; "she is old and clever, but I should not call her a dear. That word suits some one else."

"Me," cried Joan, triumphantly.

"How clever of you to guess that! Hulloo, who is this?"

The gates were opened and a sledge issued, drawn by two black ponies. In it sat Lady Jim, who was driving, and Dr. Constantine Demetrius.

"What is she up to now?" Lionel asked himself. He was intensely distrustful of Lady Jim, but he did not explain this to Joan.

CHAPTER VII

The sledge occupied by this well-matched couple might have been used by Pompadour, in the days when the finances of France were melting in the furnace of Versailles. The basketwork body of a swan, gilded and painted and elegantly fragile, rested delicately on slim steel runners, and glided over the frozen snow in the rear of two spirited black ponies. These, harnessed in the Russian fashion, with a paucity of trappings and many tiny silver bells, sprang forward, under Lady Jim's skilful guidance, as though they were rioting in a spring meadow. She and her companion were snugly wrapped in an opossum rug, which Leah, rather vulgarly, despised as a cheap article. Her mink cloak, with the snowy ermine scarf drawn through the shoulder cape in the latest fashion, had cost nearly ten times the amount, and Leah wore it with the proud consciousness that she owed no money for it. It was an early-winter present from Lady Frith, and she had accepted it on the generous ground that its cut and rich brown colour became her better than they would have suited the dowdy, insignificant Marchioness. But the little woman never knew that Lady Jim's good-nature had prevailed to this extent. She had thought to give Leah pleasure.

Demetrius, muffled in Muscovite sables, sat contentedly by this Tauric Diana, wondering why he had been graciously invited to drive with the goddess, after a hurried luncheon. The two were tête-à-tête, for the groom had been dispensed with as out of keeping with the novel vehicle. The excuse was artistic. Nevertheless, Demetrius suspected other reasons for the absence of an eavesdropping servant. What these might be he hoped to hear from Lady Jim.

But as yet she showed no disposition to speak frankly, for the Russian, in Jim's picturesque speech, was a gentleman to be handled "with the gloves on." Jim himself had impressed this on Leah, before he sat down to spell out *The Woman in White*. Needless to say, this unusual effort to improve what Jim was pleased to term his mind bored him extremely. "Not a word about racin'," grumbled Jim, skipping page after page. Still, as Leah pointed out the necessity of poaching on the domain of fiction, Jim sat at his lesson like a good little boy, and his wife drove out with her proposed victim. That the irony of fate might change the victim into a possible tyrant did not occur to Leah at the moment.

All the same, she was careful not to commit herself too hastily, and for two miles talked society-journal paragraphs with an assiduity at once boring and perplexing to Demetrius. Even when the sledge slipped, silent and ghost-like, over an Arctic waste, and they were alone to babble secrets to a frosty sky, Leah showed no disposition to come to the point. She wished Demetrius to question

her, and then, by seeing into his mind, she could be guided as to the most selfishly-successful way of making up her own. But the doctor guessed her reason for this diplomatic silence, and knowing what a shameless capacity she had for word-twisting and for slipping out of untenable positions, he gave her no opportunity to overlook his hand. It was certainly, as he reflected, a game of skill, but what the precise style of game might be Demetrius could not guess. However, one thing was certain; this game, like all others, was being played for money. On Lady Jim's part, that is. Demetrius shuffled his cards for the stake of love, and so, having Leah Kaimes for an antagonist, lost at the outset. A game between a man and a woman, on amatory grounds, is always unequal. The one in earnest invariably loses.

"Does this remind you of the steppes?" asked Leah, waving her whip towards a desert of snow and ice. The polite conversation was still much in evidence.

"Somewhat, madame; but I cannot remember sledging across any steppe in such charming company."

"Ah! You have never driven Mademoiselle Aksakoff, then?"

"It is a pleasure yet to come."

"In Russia?"

"Why not? She may induce her father to make my peace with the Czar."

"You would be pleased?"

Demetrius shrugged his spare shoulders, and replied in the evasive manner which characterised this conversation on the part of both.

"I am well content with England," he remarked calmly. "Many people are pleasant, and all agreeable. Also, the Duke pays me well--too well, considering he is my solitary patient."

"I never knew a physician to quarrel with his fees before," laughed Lady Jim, flicking the ponies lightly; "and you have another patient, I understand--Mr. Kaimes said something about it."

"The young priest--ah, yes. He was at the gates with that most adorable young lady, whom I presume he will marry. Your Anglican priests, like our Greek popes, have that freedom, have they not?"

"You do not answer my question."

"Ah, pardon, madame," said the doctor, with an apologetic smile and his hands palm to palm. "Yes--it is so. I have another patient, a peasant--one Harold Garth," he pronounced the name uncommonly clearly.

"How well you speak English, Monsieur Demetrius! So many foreigners over-emphasise their 'h's', and slur their 'r's'."

"We Russians have a capacity for tongues. I know five languages."

"Can you tell the truth in any one of them?" asked Lady Jim, rather rudely; but then she wished to make him lose his temper, in the hope of breaking down his reserve. But love had not yet blinded Demetrius, and he became offensively gentle.

"To you, madame, I always speak the truth."

"I take you at your word," said Lady Jim, smartly. "Why did you leave Russia, Monsieur Demetrius?"

"Madame, I come of a princely family, but for the sake of humanity I practised my profession in Moscow. A dear friend of mine foolishly joined the Anarchists, and an order was issued for his arrest. Fortunately, the official who signed the warrant was my patient, and I chanced to be with him when the paper was brought for his signature. He laid it aside for the moment, and I saw my friend's name. I therefore gave my patient a drug, which made him sleep for twenty-four hours, so that he could not sign. Meanwhile, my friend escaped--it matters not how--but he escaped, with my help. Through a rival doctor, my use of the drug to aid my friend became known, and I was accused of conspiring also. The governor of Moscow was enraged, and ordered my arrest in my friend's place. The prospect of Siberia was not pleasant, so I crossed the frontier after many delightful adventures, with the recital of which I shall not trouble you. Behold me, therefore, in your free country, madame, no longer a subject of the Czar, but your devoted slave."

He told the story, without preamble or excuse, in an unemotional and level voice, though all the time he wondered why Lady Jim desired to hear it. She gave him no explanation. "And if you go back to Russia?" she asked carelessly.

"I fear I shall never go back, madame."

"Who knows? Mademoiselle Aksakoff might----"

"Precisely, madame. She might, and, with small encouragement, she would. But her gaining of my pardon would assuredly lead to a marriage of gratitude."

"That would be no sacrifice."

"To many--no. To myself--madame, it is impossible!"

"Can you not make your peace without her influence?"

"Alas, no, madame. The Grand Duke was furious at my share in my friend's escape. He would give much to capture me, and should I set foot on the Continent"--he shrugged his shoulders significantly; "but the Third Section has no power in your land of liberty."

"The Third Section?"

"If it pleases madame better, the secret police. No; unless I marry Mademoiselle Aksakoff, of whom I admit my unworthiness, I must remain in exile--but it has many compensations," he added, bowing his head courteously to Lady Jim's profile.

"Quite so," she assented, scarcely heeding the compliment; then added thoughtfully, "You are a daring man, Monsieur Demetrius."

"Daring, when necessary, madame. But I confess to a love of ease."

Leah swung her ponies round a curve with careless dexterity. "It is not probable that any one will invite you to leave your lotus-eating, monsieur. Thank you for the story."

"It is at your service, madame."

Lady Jim hesitated. "You do not ask me why I requested you to relate it," she said at last.

"Your wish is a command. A command is never questioned."

"I might wish you to do something that you might question."

"Ah, no--believe me!"

"Don't jump in the dark," said Leah, with a hard little laugh; "by the way, this woman, for whom you ventured so much----"

"It was a man, madame."

"David and Jonathan in Crim Tartary, I suppose. They say," she gave a conscious laugh, "that a man would venture farther for a woman than for one of his own sex. You, I resume, are an exception."

"Madame, one does some things for friendship, but all things for love."

Leah glanced at the pale face beside her with a smile, and saw that the dark eyes were full of fire, "You are romantic."

"As is every man, when he loves, madame."

"I understand--Mademoiselle Aksakoff."

"You penetrate my thoughts admirably."

Lady Jim relieved her feelings by using the whip on the obedient ponies. Demetrius was clever and suspicious; also, as his story assured her, he was daring, clear-headed, and might be dangerous. If she gave this man a hold over her, he might be, and probably would be, unscrupulous enough to use his power. Moreover, Lionel had not yet asked the Duke, and there was always the chance that the money could be obtained without the necessity of plotting. Leah had taken the doctor for this delightful drive with the intention of speaking plainly; but his skilful use of words made her cautious. She was too clever a woman to build her tower without reckoning the expense.

Demetrius watched her with keen, questioning eyes and a perfectly impassive face, but he learned nothing. Lady Jim was quite as Oriental as himself in masking her emotions. Nevertheless, he guessed that the interest displayed in his past involved more than the satisfying of an idle curiosity. She wanted money--he was certain of that. But unless she intended to sell him to the Third Section, he could not conceive why she had forced his confidence. The enigma irritated him, though he paid a silent tribute to the diplomatic powers of this charming Englishwoman. But, cool and cautious as he was, her next speech nearly reduced him to the necessity of speaking plainly, although he regarded candour as a greater sin than making love to another man's wife.

"Now we'll drive home," said Leah, briskly.

"Ah, but no, madame. This is charming."

"And chilly. I am not a Russian, to revel in snow and ice."

"Madame, the fire in our veins prevents our feeling the disagreeables of nature. I am no phlegmatic Englishman."

"How interesting," said Leah, indifferently. "I wonder if the cattle will face this snowstorm."

They were driving straight into a chaos of eddying flakes, and meeting the sting of bitter sleet dashed in their blinking eyes by the wind. Demetrius bit his lips, and suppressed his fiery nature with an effort due to years of training. He could have killed this woman with her contemptuous indifference and impregnable self-possession. As the ponies plunged, with tossing heads and jingling bells, into that Arctic hurricane, he wished that the sledge would overturn, so that he might extort a word of gratitude by saving her life. But Leah's courage was as high as his own, and her strength greater, so it was quite probable that she would be able to look after herself. All he could do was to unflinchingly face the volleying snow, while Lady Jim dashed through the hostile elements like Semiramis in her war-chariot. With a turn of her wrist she prevented the frightened ponies dashing into a thorny hedge, with another turn swung the light vehicle away from a dangerous ditch, and then lashed the animals into a headlong gallop, which ended only when they trembled, with smoking flanks and drooping heads, before the Firmingham porch. And throughout that furious, rocking, blinding drive Demetrius sat grimly silent. Lady Jim was disappointed.

It would have been more courageous and amusing had he made love to her in the jaws of death.

"Quite a Russian adventure," she said, tossing the reins to a groom, and jumped out, all colour and animation. "I hope you were not afraid, Monsieur Demetrius," she added unjustly.

"For you," he replied significantly.

With a rosy face and a display of white teeth, Leah faced him on the steps. "There was no need, I assure you. I can look after myself in every way."

"I can believe that, madame."

"Then why talk nonsense?"

"To amuse you."

"My good man, I don't want amusement, but help."

Demetrius started forward, impulsively. "Command me."

Lady Jim flung her wraps, her whip, her mink cape, and her gloves into his arms. "Thanks," she said carelessly, and turned towards the library, leaving her illegal admirer pale with rage.

She stopped laughing at the remembrance of his wrath when she saw Lionel studying a book near the window. "Well?" she asked, coming lightly towards him: "any news?"

"Yes; I have seen the Duke!"

"And he--and he----" her voice died away under stress of emotion.

"He will help you!"

Leah's first feeling was one of relief, and she was almost on the point of expressing gratitude, but a sudden remembrance that aid from the Duke meant the retention of Jim as a most undesirable husband, cooled the warm impulse. She recovered her self-command, and was about to go into figures, when Mrs.

Penworthy with a noisy party bustled into the room, looking rather tousled and flushed.

"We have been playing 'Hunt the Slipper,'" she announced, in her high, thin voice, "and Algy found mine three times."

Lady Jim, annoyed at the irruption, glanced at Mrs. Penworthy's feet, which could scarcely have worn the slippers of Cinderella. "I can quite believe that," she said sweetly, and left the room smiling.

"What does she mean?" asked Algy, obtusely.

Mrs. Penworthy knew perfectly well what was meant, but was too feminine to explain, save in a way calculated to mislead her courtier. This could be done by arousing his egotism.

"She means that you are clever to play the game so well," was her explanation. "I rather think Lady Jim admires you, Algy."

The youth fondled what he called a moustache. "Rippin' woman, Lady Jim," said he, taking the speech literally.

"Go and tell her so," snapped Mrs. Penworthy, colouring angrily.

"You wouldn't like it."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," remarked the lady, fervently hating him for his stupidity, "than to see her dancing on you, as she does on all men who are foolish enough to make themselves carpets."

"I'm not a carpet."

"No! You're a tame cat."

"Then come and play Puss in the Corner," urged Algy, gaily, and Mrs. Penworthy consented, as this game had nothing to do with abnormal slippers.

Leah, pleased at having snubbed Mrs. Penworthy, whom she considered quite an improper person, went to look for Jim in his room. He was there, sure enough, lying on the sofa with the novel tossed carelessly on the floor, and a black pipe

between his lips. Evidently he had not heard the good news.

"Jim," cried Leah, breathlessly, "the Duke will part."

"He has parted," growled Jim, swinging his long legs on to the floor and producing a cheque. "Look at that."

Lady Jim did. It was for two hundred pounds. "Oh!" She crushed it in her two hands, as though she were throttling his Grace. "What an insult!"

CHAPTER VIII

Two hundred pounds. Lady Jim rapidly ran over in her mind such of the most pressing liabilities as she could recollect, and shuddered at a total of two thousand. They owed that, and many other debts which, for the moment, escaped her memory. So far as she could see, nothing remained but a compulsory journey through the court. Not that she really minded bankruptcy. Plenty of people, accepted as immaculate by society, made use of that desirable institution to get a receipt for past extravagances, on the plea of having lived beyond their incomes. She and Jim could make the same excuse with perfect truth, and would doubtless be enabled to make a fresh start. And if a few tradesmen were ruined, what did it matter? They always overcharged, and it might be a lesson to them not to worry customers.

No; the bankruptcy court matters very little, but the want of ready cash mattered a great deal. Leah cared nothing about paying the bills, but ardently desired to have a re-filled purse and no bother about such vulgar things as pounds, shillings, and pence. It was perfectly idiotic of the Duke to be so stingy. If he had come down with a thousand, she and Jim could have enjoyed themselves abroad for a couple of months, and meanwhile, he could have paid these troublesome

tradesmen. But two hundred pounds! Did the old fool take them for the respectable middle-class couple, living in slate-roofed houses, to which she had alluded? Without Jim's assistance she could get rid of that trifle in a fortnight.

"I believe your father's brain is softening," she complained crossly.

"I'm not responsible for his crazy arithmetic," retorted Jim, with the helpful addition of a few adjectives.

But, beyond swearing as much as he dared in her presence, Jim could offer no assistance, and Leah concluded that, after all, it might be necessary to trust Demetrius. Her husband, having gained some faint idea of the novel, had ended in declining to turn fiction into fact. His remarks were not without shrewdness.

"The chap who writes the story knows what's goin' to happen," said Jim, when pressed for his opinion, "an' can invent circumstances to dodge results. But if we start a yarn of this kind on our own, we don't know what the end 'ull be."

"Oh yes!" protested Leah, very patiently, considering she disagreed entirely; "you'll disappear, and I shall become a widow with my share of the twenty thousand."

"An' how long will your share last?" asked Jim, derisively.

"That depends upon my mood. Some time, I expect, seeing that your death will force me into retirement, and crape is not so very expensive. And when you get through your lot, Jim, what will you do?"

"That's what I'm askin' you," said Jim, evasively; and continued hurriedly, lest she should insist upon a disagreeable explanation, "'Sides, there's my father to be considered."

"Since when have you taken him to your heart?"

"Oh, it's all very well talkin'. But your father's your father, when all's said an' done. The Duke doesn't think me a saint, but he'd be sorry to see me die."

"No one wants you to die," she said impatiently.

"That's bunkum, an'--an'--what's the word?"

"Might I suggest 'sophistry'?" said Lady Jim, quite aware that her reasoning was fallacious.

"Oh, you'll suggest anythin' to get your own way. But what I mean is that, though I do die, I don't really die."

"How clearly you put things, Jim. Please yourself. We must go back to town with this money, to be whitewashed;" and eyeing the cheque contemptuously, she saw that it was unfortunately made payable to Jim. Her husband stretched for the cheque and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

"I'm goin' to see the Duke m'self," he announced, "an' tell him everythin'."

"What, about the money we've raised on the income?"

"Every blessed thing," said Kaimes, doggedly; "he's my father, an' it's his duty to square things."

"He mightn't follow your reasoning," murmured Leah, with one hand on the mantelpiece and the other holding up her skirts to warm one foot. "But you can't make a much worse mess of it than Lionel has made. Two hundred pounds--he must have thought he was asking money for some old woman. Shall I come with you, Jim?"

"No." He halted at the door to deliver himself of the remark, "You're like a red rag to a bull."

"Oh, very well. I only thought you'd like me to translate your talk into something resembling English."

"Don't you fret yourself, I'll make him understand. An' if I do get things squared," cried Jim, warming at the thought of his heroism in facing an angry parent, "you'll have to drop spending money, an' live as other women do."

"Yes, dear James, and you'll live as other men do, won't you?"

"I'll do what I jolly well please. An' why James?"

"There never was a St. Jim, that I ever heard of," mused Leah, turning pensive eyes on her exasperated husband, "and as you wish to canonise yourself, of

course you must change your name. Yes, James"--she moved swiftly towards him, and detained him gently by the lapels of his coat--"from this time forth we'll live in holy matrimony, and pig it on what's left of the income. Curzon Street given up, Bayswater remains, and there, James darling, we'll live a life of extremely plain living and high thinking."

"Don't talk bosh," growled Jim, trying to escape; but she held on.

"No, James, I won't, if you will only raise my intellect to the level of your own. And think what a delightful existence it will be, James. A cheap Bayswater dungeon, with three servants and the shopping done at Whiteley's. I'll turn my dresses and trim my hats and you'll give up your clubs, to curse in a stuffy drawing-room while you play bezique with your dear wife, till we go to bed at ten. No more betting on Podaskas, James; no more whist-drives, or bridge, or any such expensive naughtinesses. And how nice it will be for you, James, to flirt with those earnestly-fashionable suburban girls, who are just half an hour behind the times, and who----" Here Jim rent his garments from Leah's grasp, and departed in haste with an impolite word. His wife's humour did not appeal to him in the least, and he banged the door unnecessarily hard.

Leah returned to warm her toes and laugh till she cried. There was something excessively amusing in the idea of Jim setting up for a plaster saint. For once in his dull life he displayed a sense of humour, and she picked up the discarded novel with a fresh burst of laughter at the picture of the Bayswater ménage, as drawn by her fertile fancy. Jim as a middle-class Philistine tickled her even more than Jim in a stained-glass attitude, with an artificial halo misfitting his empty head.

But a remembrance of the cheque--payable to Jim--and of her husband's possible position at the moment, telling clumsy truths to an aggrieved father, made her serious. Certainly the Duke, pleased to hear his son speak honestly for once in a life of consistent fibbing, might shed tears over a hastily-produced cheque-book. Jim's falsehoods, in times of pressing need, were almost inspired, and it was not impossible that he might return with the loot. Then, the tradespeople being paid, Leah decided that she could run up fresh bills to any amount: they would be all the more eager to give her unlimited credit when they knew that the Duke was in the background. Decidedly the prospect was not so bad, and, after all, it might be dangerous to make real-life experiments in sensational fiction.

These common-sense reflections led Lady Jim to thank the watchful fetish for governing her tongue during the afternoon. Demetrius could be nasty when he liked. She was certain of that, and it was just as well to give him no chance. Some people carried tyranny to a ridiculous excess, and liked to hear their victims squeal unmeaningly. Leah did not belong to the squealing species, and vowed a vow that Demetrius should never have an opportunity of provoking such futile outcries. As a gleam of good sense warned her of possible danger, she decided to avoid the Russian, or only to flirt sufficiently to make him miserable and Jim cross.

Having settled the question in this sensible way, Leah sought her room to dress for the five o'clock muffin-scramble. She assumed the prettiest tea-gown she possessed, for the truly feminine purpose of irritating Demetrius into over-estimating what he had lost. Descending like a Homeric deity in a cloud--of lace--she went at once to the library, and restored to its place the text-book of her proposed fraud. Fortunately, the room was empty, so no one would ever know that the novel had been read with a view to plagiarism. Not that it mattered much now, since Jim was proceeding on the lines of "Honesty is the best policy." Leah hoped fervently that he would succeed, but felt more than a trifle doubtful. Jim was so new to this straightforward method of gaining his ends.

The house-party was picnicking in the winter-garden, a delightful Eden, where tropical plants flourished in defiance of the season. On its glass roof the hail rattled like small shot, and through its glass walls could be seen the bleak, wintry landscape, faintly white in the deepening gloom. These glimpses of the unpleasant increased the sense of comfort, and over-civilised humanity luxuriated in the warm atmosphere, as independent of nature's laws as the palm-trees under which it ate and drank and talked scandal. The frumps nibbled dry toast and sipped milk; the fashionables devoured dainty sandwiches and enjoyed the strongest of tea, and both aided digestion with chatter and laughter. It was the complacent contentment of animals, mumbling a plentiful meal, and for the moment all spiritual instincts were governed by material needs.

Mrs. Penworthy's courtiers were feeding their queen, who had a large appetite for so small a woman. After a full meal she was disposed to be amiable, even to Freddy, had he been there; but she became decidedly cross when some of the court deserted her for "that woman," as she termed Lady Jim. Leah was feminine enough to enjoy the fallen expression on Mrs. Penworthy's face, and accepted with marked pleasure the attentions of those who crowded round her. The sight

gave Mrs. Penworthy a fit of indigestion, which prevented her enjoying a late dinner. It was hard that her vanity had to content itself with the banal compliments of the faithful Algy, who tried to be a host in himself, and was snubbed for his ambition.

"May I present my nephew to you?" asked Lord Sargon, in his thin, precise voice.

Leah intimated that she would be charmed, and found herself nodding to a slim, dark young man, clean-shaven and alert. He looked more alive than the languid youths around her, and she was not surprised when Sargon explained that Mr. Askew was a naval officer, who had lately returned from a five years' cruise.

"I thought you hadn't been wrapped up in cotton wool all your life," said Lady Jim, when Sargon had removed the attendant youths and the lieutenant was making himself agreeable in a bluff, briny way.

"Do I look so uncivilised?" he asked, with laughing eyes.

"Highly. You are the nearest approach to pre-historic man I have yet seen," said she, and thus was unjust to Jim.

"I am sorry----"

"Oh, there's no need to apologise. I daresay Circe found Ulysses very agreeable."

"Homer says so," answered Askew, who appeared to be well read; "but if I am Ulysses, you must be Circe."

"I accept the compliment!"

"Is it a compliment?" asked the pre-historic man, daringly.

"Unless meant for one it should not have been said."

"Beg pardon. I'm several kinds of ass. But I did mean it civilly, you know. Circe was a clever woman, whose magic turned men into outward semblances of their real characters."

Lady Jim smiled scornfully. "And if my magic could transform these," she glanced disparagingly round the place, "what a menagerie it would be! Pigs, and snakes, and parrots, and----"

"Dogs."

"Of the mongrel kind, Mr. Askew. Do you speak of yourself?"

He nodded laughingly. "Dogs are so devoted!"

"That means you wish to attach yourself to me," said Leah, gravely. "I might take you at your word--I need a friend; but Ulysses deserted Circe."

Askew laughed, and gazed admiringly at her beautiful, pensive face. "We talk parables, I think," he said, with assumed lightness.

"Prehistoric man always did, I understand."

"On the contrary, his speech was direct and blunt!"

"Mine will be now," smiled Lady Jim. "This cup has been empty for five minutes, and you never offered to----"

The young man took the tiny cup hastily. "But for the publicity of the place, I would ask you to tread upon my prostrate body."

Leah eyed his lithe, active figure as he went to the bamboo table presided over by Lady Frith. He was really a delightful sailorman, she reflected, and quicker than most of his sex to understand the unspoken. It might be more amusing to drop Demetrius and flirt with him. But then, his face was too honest, and he might object to being made use of.

"Men of that kind are so dreadfully in earnest," sighed Leah, with a sense of irritation; "they think a woman always means what she says."

Askew walked lightly over the mosaic floor with a fresh cup of tea and a plate of hot cakes. Some man bustled in his way, and he stopped to avoid an upset of his burden. At the moment, he glanced towards the Moorish door which admitted triflers into the winter paradise. To Lady Jim's wonderment, he started, and a look of surprise overspread his expressive face. Her eyes turned at once in the

direction of the entrance, and she beheld Jim blinking his eyes at the dazzle of light. He looked heavy and sullen, which hinted that the interview with the Duke had not been successful. But Leah forgot that momentous question for the moment, as her quick brain was trying to understand Askew's look of surprise. Before she could ask herself what he could possibly know about Jim, he approached with the tea.

"This is nice and hot," he said, placing the plate on the table at her elbow and offering the cup. "I hope you'll forgive me for neglecting you."

"On one condition," replied Leah, stirring her tea.

"Consider it fulfilled," was the impetuous answer.

"Why did you look surprised when you saw that gentleman at the door?"

Leah pointedly suppressed the fact that Kaimes was her husband, as, if there was anything, she would learn it the more easily by pretending that Jim was a stranger. In fact, should Askew learn that the man who had startled him was her lawful lord, he might decline to open his lips. The lieutenant's next words proved the wisdom of her concealment.

"Oh, Berring," he said, carelessly. "Well, I was surprised to see Berring so unexpectedly."

"Is his name Berring?" asked Lady Jim, guessing that she was about to learn something connected with Jim's very shady past.

"Yes; I met him in Lima."

"Lima?"

"In Peru, and that's in South America."

Leah nodded. "I did learn geography at school," she said, setting down her empty cup; and when Askew coloured at the implied snub, softened it by asking a friendly question: "You are surprised at meeting Mr.--er--er--Berring, here?"

"Yes; I said so before. A nice sort of chap, but selfish."

"What a reader of character you are, Mr. Askew!" He looked up eagerly. "You know him, then."

"A little. Why do you ask?"

The young man stared at the ground, and replied in muffled tones: "I thought you might have met his wife."

"Mrs. Berring?"

"Of course."

Leah began to laugh. The idea that Jim might be a bigamist had never struck her before. She had guessed that there was a woman connected with those frequent journeys to Lima, but that Jim had adopted the Mormon religion was news. Some women would have been angry, but Leah had no amatory feelings likely to arouse jealousy, so she was frankly amused at her husband's duplicity. Also, she was sorry for Mrs. Berring, who perhaps was silly enough to love Jim.

"Is she a nice woman?" was her next question.

"She's an angel."

"That means, you love her."

"How do you----?"

"Because you are a brick wall I can see through, Mr. Askew. No; I have never met Mrs. Berring. Why did she throw you over and marry Mr.--er--Berring?"

Askew looked quite alarmed. "I say you *are* clever," he remarked.

"Why not? You called me Circe, and I must live up to the name. Well?"

"Well!" echoed Askew, blankly, and their eyes met. He coloured. "No, I can't tell you," he said quickly, for he guessed her desire.

"Yes, you can, and you will," rejoined Leah, composedly.

Jim was bearing the artillery of Mrs. Penworthy's eyes in his usual indifferent way, and showed no disposition to seek out his wife. Probably he would remain

for the next hour in the clutches of the little woman, who was the limpet to Jim's rock. This being so, Leah began to ask questions which Askew hesitated to answer.

"We hardly know one another," he murmured, embarrassed. "I daren't tell you, Lady James."

"Ah! Then there's something improper in the matter?"

Askew flushed through his bronzed skin. "Not at all," he said in a brusque tone. "Señorita Fajardo is all that is good and holy and pure."

"What bread and butter!" thought Leah, wondering if Jim had stumbled upon a convent. But she was too wise to quote Byron to this young man, who apparently was simple enough to regard love as something sacred.

"Fajardo," she repeated. "A Spanish name."

"And a Spanish lady," he said, gloomily. "Lola Fajardo, of the Estancia, San Jago, near Rosario."

"I thought you said of Lima?"

"No; I met her there. She is in the habit of stopping at Lima with her aunt. But her true home is at Rosario, in the Santa Fe province of the Argentine republic. I wonder if Berring brought her to England. She was madly in love with him."

"She must have been, to marry him."

"Oh, Berring's a good-looking chap, and not bad," said Askew, with the innate chivalry of a man towards a successful rival. "I suppose they *did* marry."

"Oh! Then you are not certain?"

"No; I never even knew if they were engaged. But when I joined my ship again at Callao, every one said 'marriage'--they were so uncommonly thick. I must ask Berring."

"I'm sure he'll be delighted to afford you the information you seek," was Lady Jim's ironical reply.

"Have you seen Mrs. Berring?" asked the young man, eagerly.

"No; I don't think any Mrs. Berring is stopping here."

"Then perhaps he did not marry Lola, after all," cried Askew, rising hastily, and with flashing eyes, "unless"--his voice fell--"she is dead."

Leah yawned. "Really, I don't know," she replied; "you had better ask Mr. Berring. I see he is passing out of the garden with Mrs. Penworthy."

"In that case I can't spoil sport," laughed the lieutenant, with an obvious effort; "but later on."

"Later on, of course," she said, rising. "Here comes your uncle."

Lord Sargon advanced, and, with an apologetic look towards Leah, took Askew's arm. "I wish to present you to Lady Canvey," he said.

The young man looked towards his charmer. "Will you permit me to leave you for a time?"

"Certainly. You will find Lady Canvey delightful, and as pre-historic as you can wish. We may meet after dinner," and, with a nod, she left the winter garden for the purpose of seeking solitude. She wanted to think over Jim's iniquities, and to consider what use might be made of them for her own benefit.

Lady Canvey was delighted to receive Askew, as she liked handsome young men, especially when they were deferential and attentive, as this new acquaintance appeared to be. "Though I'm a bad substitute for Lady Jim," she remarked pleasantly. "Lady Jim?"

"That charming creature with whom you have been talking."

"Yes, of course, Lady Canvey. She is indeed charming."

"But private property. Her husband is the Duke's second son, at present in the clutches of that little harpy, Mrs. Penworthy. Don't you make love to Lady Jim, or you'll burn your fingers. I mistrust red-haired women, myself. But she and Jim match each other capitally. Their marriage was made in heaven;" and Lady Canvey chuckled.

"Is her husband here?" asked Askew, looking round, anxious to see who owned Circe-of-the-many-wiles.

"No; he went out with Mrs. Penworthy a quarter of an hour ago."

Askew remembered how Lady Jim had drawn his attention to an outgoing couple. "Didn't the lady go out with a Mr. Berring?" he gasped.

"No; with Lord Jim Kaimes!"

"And she--his wife--the lady I----" Askew stopped with a groan.

"Try an unmarried woman," advised Lady Canvey, misunderstanding his emotion. "It's more proper, and less expensive."

CHAPTER IX

Keeping up the necessary Darby-and-Joan comedy, Kaimes strolled into his wife's dressing-room half an hour before dinner to inquire if she was ready. Leah had a second-hand view of him in a full-length mirror before which she posed, while her maid added a few final touches to an eminently successful frock. From the composed expression of his face she guessed that he had not yet renewed his acquaintance with Mr. Askew, and therefore must be ignorant that the free-spoken sailor had let the cat out of the bag. Lady Jim possessed the animal now, but she did not intend to reveal her capture until Jim explained how he had sped with the Duke. A slight nod towards the glass showed her husband that she was aware of his presence, and the maid continued to use experienced fingers. But Leah looked so charming, that further trouble in this way was like adding sugar to honey. Jim stared approvingly, and, when the maid was dismissed, saw his way to a compliment.

"You have the good points of several women rolled into one, Leah," he said, with the look of a sultan appraising an odalisque.

"That polite speech means much, coming from a man of your experience, my dear Jim. What good point of Mrs. Penworthy's have I annexed?"

"You're jealous!"

"Horribly! You are so deeply attached to that bundle of faded chiffon."

"I don't care two straws for her."

"Appearances are misleading, then. But," added Leah, remembering Askew's eulogy, "it may be that you prefer something that's good and holy and pure."

"I don't know why you should say that," grumbled Jim, annoyed at being credited with such primitive tastes.

"You may know before long," and she laughed at the thought of the marine bomb-shell which would shortly shatter Jim's complacency.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," said Kaimes, with unaffected surprise, "an' I'm confoundedly hungry."

"Ah! Did the Duke's lecture give you an appetite?"

"Leah!" Jim became so serious as to look almost intelligent. "My father is the best man who ever wore shoe-leather."

"He is usually condemned to cloth boots for gouty feet," murmured Leah, patting the back of her head. "So you've pulled the wool over his eyes again?"

"I wish you wouldn't use slang," protested Jim, virtuously.

"I can't pretend to vie with Mrs. Penworthy's purity of speech, my dear man. How much have you got out of the Duke?"

"Well, he hasn't given me money----"

"Oh!"

"But he's promised----

"Ah!"

"I wish you'd let me speak," cried Kaimes, testily, "My father has promised to pay all the debts----"

"Good heavens! Is he aware of the amount?"

"Wait, I've not finished. He'll pay the debts, and reduce our income to a thousand a year till he recoups himself."

"Really! I thought you had seen your father, and not a money-lender. Have you accepted this most generous offer?"

"Yes, I have," said Jim, sulkily, and kicking a mat out of the way.

"I see. It's to be Bayswater after all, James."

"If you talk like that, I'll go down to dinner without you."

"By all means. You've taken away my appetite."

She laughed in a way calculated to still further infuriate Jim, who paced the room in a towering passion. Nevertheless, she was seriously angry. Had the Duke refused all help, it would have been more decent; but this bargain, which was all on one side, annoyed her beyond measure. What did the Duke mean by taking *their* money?

"It seems to me we've got to pay our own debts, then," she said, while Jim seethed like a whirlpool.

"An' why shouldn't we? It's only fair."

Leah stared, and began to think that Jim was too good for this world.

"I hope you are not going to die," she said, anxiously.

"Not in your way," cried Kaimes, misunderstanding her, "we aren't going to have any buryin' alive or substituted corpses, an' I'm goin' to hang on as a respectable member of society."

"I'll come and hear you preach, Jim."

"I'm preachin' now," raged her husband, "an' don't you make any mistake, Leah. I've told the Duke everythin'."

"How injudicious! He might have had a fit."

"He didn't even blame me," said Jim, breaking down, "an' there were tears in his eyes."

Leah laughed amazingly long and loud, considering the tightness of her corset.

"I wish I had been present. Did you cry too, Jim?"

"I jolly well nearly did," said Kaimes, truthfully, if ungrammatically, "though it's no good explainin' to an icicle like you. But the pater's goin' to pay the debts, free our income, an' let the Curzon Street house."

"Better and better. Then we *do* go to Bayswater?"

"He'll allow us one thousand a year till the debts are wiped off," went on Kaimes hurriedly, and wishing to get the explanation over, "an' we can go abroad for a couple of years."

"You can. I shan't!"

"As my wife, you must."

"As an individual, I shan't," retorted Lady Jim, calmly. She was getting over her rage now, as she foresaw a very different interview between herself and Jim before they retired for the night. "It is very good of you to have settled all this without consulting me. And now that you have done so, let us go to dinner."

"But I----"

"There's the gong," observed Leah, opening the door, "and I don't like cold soup."

"You'll have to like lots of things now you didn't like before," said Jim, as they went down.

"The selection doesn't include you, my good man, so don't be disappointed."

Jim could have shaken her, and began to understand why the lower orders indulged in wife-beating. But as they were entering the drawing-room at this moment, he had to play the part of a devoted husband. Leah floated radiantly into the brilliantly lighted apartment, and Jim sought out the oldest and ugliest woman he could find. When he thought of his wife, beauty sickened him for the time being. Thus it came about that Miss Jaffray had the pleasure of shouting into his ear throughout a long and wearisome dinner.

Whether it was the work of the fetish or of Lady Frith, Leah did not know, but she found herself seated at the table with Askew on her right hand.

The young man looked flustered, and ill at ease. "I'm so sorry!" he began apologetically, and, as she thought, tactlessly.

"That you're my neighbour?" she interrupted sweetly. "How unkind!"

"No! But I never knew he was your husband."

"Who? Mr. Berring?"

"Don't make it harder for me," he entreated softly. "I've been calling myself names ever since we parted."

"You should have left that to me, Mr. Askew."

"There's nothing in it, you know," he stuttered, heedlessly. "Of course, she never married him."

"I hope not, for the sake of morality," said Lady Jim, lightly, and thinking that the soup was worse than usual. "However, it doesn't matter. My husband is a modest man, and sometimes drops his title when travelling. I daresay, as Mr. Berring, he thought he was free to make love."

"But he wasn't," protested Askew, with a glance towards the unconscious Jim, who apparently had not recognised him.

"You should tell him so."

"I intend to--in the smoking room."

Lady Jim looked at him imperiously, and softened her voice to a very direct whisper. "Don't make trouble," she said, in a somewhat domineering tone; "that will do no good and much harm. And after all, married or unmarried, every man has a right to admire a pretty woman."

"But not to make love to her," muttered the young man, with another vengeful glance.

"I am no casuist," replied Leah, calmly; "and you should be pleased that things are as they are. You can now return to Lima, or Rosario, and marry the lady."

"She wouldn't have me!"

"Is she so much in love with Mr. Berring, then?"

"Please don't, Lady James. I can't talk like this to you."

She gave a light laugh. "It seems to me that you are talking; therefore I repeat my question."

"It might only have been gratitude," he murmured.

"For what?"

"Berring--I mean your husband--saved her from being trampled upon by a mustang."

"How picturesque, and how suited to Jim's qualifications! And she----?"

"No, she didn't," interrupted Askew, hurriedly. "I see I have been mistaken. It was gratitude, not love."

"Of course," said Lady Jim, jeeringly; "a woman always prefers to exercise the former rather than the latter."

"I wish I'd stopped and tried my luck," muttered the sailor, not clever enough to interpret this speech.

"It's not too late. Mr. Berring is safely secured, by love and the law, to my apron-strings, so you can go back and----"

"No; I've just come in for a property of sorts, and the service has seen the last of me."

"Is Señorita Fajardo in the same predicament as the service?"

"There's a cousin, Lady James----"

"A female cousin, who goes with the property, as a fixture. I quite understand. You have to marry her, out of gratitude for the money, and without the discomforting passion of love. The Spanish lady's history repeats itself, I see."

Askew was rather discomfited. "How quick you are!"

"You can't have had much to do with women," she murmured; "but I hope you will make no trouble in the smoking-room."

"No; as things are, it's none of my funeral," he observed, grumpily.

"Quite so. I am the chief mourner."

"But I say, Lady James," said the lieutenant, anxiously, "I hope what I've inadvertently told you won't----"

"Of course not," she assured him, mendaciously; "my husband is most trustworthy, as you can see by his choice of that ugly old maid as a dinner companion. You were mistaken."

"I think I must have been," said Askew, with great relief. "Of course, people talk at Lima, as elsewhere," he ended apologetically.

"Unless South America is inhabited by the deaf and dumb, I suppose they do."

"You're laughing at me, Lady James."

"I always laugh. It's good for the digestion."

"At everything?"

"At everything."

"Even at love?" he asked timidly.

She shot an amused glance at his colouring face. "Remember you are engaged to the fixture, Mr. Askew."

"But I say, can't I come and see you in town?"

"I shall be delighted, if you can find your way to Curzon Street."

"You live there?" he asked obtusely.

"In a most respectable manner with my husband, Mr. Berring. I'm known as Lady Jim of Curzon Street. Most improper, isn't it, when Berring----?"

"I say, don't," expostulated the young man, quickly. "I'll never forgive myself for being such a fool. Can I call you Lady Jim?"

He was getting on very fast, and Leah, in the interests of virtue, deemed it necessary to snub him. "Certainly not. Only people who have known me fifty years address me so familiarly."

"You must believe in re-incarnation then," he retorted.

This was clever and pleased her. "I was Circe in the days of Homer, Mr. Askew. But as to my name now, there is another Lady Jim--a horrid woman who carries tracts and meddles with morals, and dresses in a piously shabby fashion. So that we may not be mixed up, I am known by the name of the street I live in. To you I am Lady James Kaimes!"

"And Circe, the sorceress," he murmured.

Leah laughed. "We'll see what sort of animal my magic will turn you into," she observed, with an encouraging smile.

This was a distinct promise, or at least he construed it as such, for his eyes brightened, and he glanced at her in a way which assured her that she was looking her best. He was certainly a delightful boy, she reflected, if somewhat fickle. But a man who was catholic enough to marry the fixture, and adore the

Spanish lady, and make sudden love to herself, must be worth feminine appreciation and study. Besides, he was good-looking, and had money, conjoined with a frank and unsuspicious nature. Assuredly, he might be useful, if not inclined to explore the Land of Tenderness too assiduously. But in that case, he might compromise her in an earnest, pig-headed way, which would be at once boring, ridiculous, and dangerous. Leah approved of playing with fire, but she was too careful to risk a personal conflagration. Though allured by the prospect of tormenting an honest heart, she had not made up her mind to enjoy the opportunity by the time she left the dining-room. But a distinctly tigerish glance, sent to her address by Demetrius, almost inclined her to give young Askew the chance of making a fool of himself. The Russian had apparently noticed the embryo flirtation.

"All the better," thought Leah, sailing into the Adamless Eden of the winter garden; "it will be an additional card to play"--which showed that Lady Jim was by no means satisfied with the arrangement come to between her husband and his father.

"A cigarette, dear Lady Jim?" simpered Mrs. Penworthy.

"No, thanks; I leave smoking to women who bait their hooks with agreeable vices;" and she moved towards Lady Canvey.

It was horribly rude, and Mrs. Penworthy choked back an hysterical scream.

"Delightful woman, Lady James," said Miss Jaffray.

"Delightful," assented the other, who at the moment would gladly have mounted the scaffold on a charge of murdering her insolent rival. "I call her perfectly lovely. Such a perfect complexion, and exquisite figure, and heavenly eyes, and large hands."

But this piece of spite was wasted, as by this time Lady Jim was seated by her godmother, assuring that sceptical lady how absolutely delighted she was to learn that dear Jim had arranged matters with the dear Duke. "And so sweet of the Duke to tell you," she went on. "I know how anxious you have been about me.

"Can you wonder at it, my dear, when you are so sweet and gentle and womanly?" said Lady Canvey, who was quite equal to a war of words.

"You must be thinking of Hilda Frith," replied Lady Jim, calmly. "I cannot call myself such an angel."

"No; you left that to the sailor-boy you were flirting with."

"Poor boy, he doesn't know how to flirt."

"You'll teach him, my dear," chuckled the old lady.

"Not without fees."

"Humph. His education will cost him a pretty penny."

"Possibly. But I might teach him for love, after the fashion of Miss Tallentire and Lionel."

"Rubbish! Joan doesn't know how to flirt."

"Or to dress either. I must ask her how the Whiteley sales are getting on."

"Leah!" said Lady Canvey, with a pained look. "Why have you such a bitter tongue?"

"I must defend myself somehow. You wouldn't have me scratch and bite, would you?"

"I would have you be more womanly and lovable, my dear."

"On a thousand a year, and such a husband as I have?"

"Every man is what his wife makes him."

"They generally go to other men's wives to be manufactured. Besides, so far as Jim is concerned, you can't make a silk purse out of a certain animal's ear."

"My dear, I am an old woman, and perhaps rather sharp-tongued at times, but I have a motherly feeling for you. Can't you give up this wild life, and go abroad to devote yourself to Jim? He has his good points, my dear, and if you would try and live more amicably with him, I am sure you would be a happy woman. Then, in a year or so, you could come back to Curzon Street, with all the debts paid, and your full income to live on. Believe me"--she laid a withered hand on

Leah's beautiful arm--"I speak for the best, my dear girl."

Leah smiled disdainfully. "Now that the sermon's over, can I pass round the plate?" she said cruelly.

"Not for me to put money in," said Lady Canvey, with a flush. "I shan't give you a penny. It is useless talking to you, Leah; your one idea is money and enjoyment and love of admiration."

"It seems to me that those are three ideas," replied Lady Jim, rising; "but as our conversation is neither enjoyable nor instructive, I shall go away." All the same she lingered, and talked in a low tone, with unexpected emotion. "You blame me, Lady Canvey, for being what I am. Pray, what chance have I had of being otherwise? I lost my mother when I was a child; I was brought up by a neglectful and selfish father; I am married to a husband who has nothing of the man about him, save those handsome looks, which lured me into a much-regretted marriage. All my life I have lived with worldly and material people, and your counsel has been as worldly as that of any one of them. I have never been shown the difference between right and wrong, and there isn't a single soul in the world who has a spark of love for me. If my up-bringing and surroundings had been better, I might be a good woman--so far as I can be, I *am* a good woman. I have my moments of regret--I have my moments when I wish I could be a religious, dowdy saint. But who will help me out of the mire--who will----?" Here she broke off, for her emotion was becoming too strong for the publicity of the place. With a violent effort, which showed the strength and courage of her nature, she calmed down, and the colour faded from her face, as did the frown, which gave place to a cynical smile. Annoyed with herself for having given Lady Canvey a glimpse of her better nature, she walked away, leaving the old woman surprised and startled, and, in her own selfish way, truly sorry. There was much truth in what Leah had said.

But her mask was on again the moment she crossed to the door, and Demetrius, who was obviously looking for her, saw only the beautiful, calm woman he knew so well. His face was as agitated as Leah's had been a few minutes previously.

"Madame, I must see you privately."

"What an extraordinary request, monsieur!"

"Ah, but you will understand----" He threw out his hands expressively.

"No; I am ignorant of the deaf and dumb language."

"Cruel--cruel."

"Silly--silly," she mocked, then glanced round with up-raised eyebrows; "don't make a scene, monsieur, or I shall begin to believe that you appreciate our English custom of lingering over the wine."

"Will you let me explain?" entreated the Russian.

"Certainly--to-morrow, at four. Ill be in the picture gallery. Good night;" and with a friendly nod she moved away.

Demetrius swore softly in Russian, which is a most picturesque language in many ways. Without a glance, Lady Jim ascended the stairs, well pleased. Demetrius was losing command of himself, and therefore would be all the easier to manage, should she require his services. "I'll have that twenty thousand before spring," she decided.

CHAPTER X

"What is love?" asked Leah, the next day, at twenty minutes past four of a clear wintry afternoon.

With all his knowledge of five languages, Demetrius could find no answer, and rose from his knees with the feelings of a man who is trying to melt an iceberg

with a lucifer match. Ever since Lady Jim arrived to keep her appointment in the picture gallery, he had been explaining his feelings at length, and in the orthodox attitude of a mortal worshipping a goddess. He had crossed his "t's" and dotted his "i's" with the utmost precision. From English he had glided into French, to plead the attractions of illicit passion: two minutes of German resulted in sentimental assertions of that passion's righteousness, and in illustrations of Wertherism; and, immediately before she asked that impossible question, he had harked back to her native tongue, to impress upon her the solid British common-sense of his wooing. Leah listened to this polyglot love-making with the feeling that she was camping under the tower of Babel. Demetrius might have been a gramophone, pouring out recitations from the poets, for all the impression his impassionate rhetoric made on her well-trained feelings.

"I suppose all these speeches can be classified under the heading of love," she said unkindly, when his exhaustion gave her an opportunity of intervening. "But-what is love?"

"I have been trying to explain," stammered the Russian, getting on his legs dispiritedly.

"Oh, your intentions are of the best. I gather that much; but I am still waiting for a definition."

"Love is worship," ventured Demetrius, rashly.

"Then why aren't you on your knees?"

"I have been on my knees for fifteen minutes."

"Really! When did you look at your watch?"

"My heart told me."

"Then your heart is a time-keeper, or perhaps a time-server."

"If you will permit me to serve you, my service will be for all time."

"Ah! It seems we are immortal, then?"

"You are," he declared passionately; "every goddess is immortal."

Lady Jim laughed. This war of words was amusing and pretty, but she wished to arrive at some conclusion which would repay her for spending an hour in a cold gallery, packed with shockingly bad pictures.

"I am waiting for your definition of love," she said at length.

"I cannot explain the impossible."

"It seems to me that you have been trying to do so. Would you like to hear how I define love?"

His eyes burned like two menacing stars. "Yes," he muttered in a husky voice, and holding his passions in leash.

"Love is sacrifice," said Leah, slowly.

"Then I--love you," he burst out. "There is no sacrifice I would not make for your dear sake."

"Can I believe that?"

"Try me," and he again dropped on his knees.

"Get up," said Lady Jim, brusquely. He did so. "Take a seat!" He did so. "Look at the floor, and not at me." He did so. "Now then," she continued, feeling relieved that those fierce eyes were not making her flesh creep, "do you know what you are, Monsieur Demetrius?"

"A fool," he murmured bitterly, his gaze on the parquet.

"I quite agree with you," she rejoined promptly. "And why?"

"Because I love you."

"Not at all. Because you don't love Katinka Aksakoff."

"What has that to do with this?" he said gloomily.

"Everything. She is free and I am not; she loves you, and I don't; she will do you good, I shall do you harm; she can gain your pardon and make your fortune----"

"And you can make me happy," cried Demetrius, looking up with the air of one who has found a clinching argument.

"With the crumbs from my husband's table?"

"You don't love him!"

The British-matron portion of Leah revolted against this plain speaking. She liked sugar-coated speeches. "You have no right to say that."

"I have no right to make love to you," cried the doctor, rising, "but I do. Pschutt"--he snapped his fingers--"what care I for that English pig, your husband? As to that young fool who sat beside you last night----"

Lady Jim clapped her hands, and jumped up, laughing. "Oh," she cried, with great enjoyment, "so it was Mr. Askew's attentions that made you lose your head?"

"But not my heart. I lost that months ago, when I first met you. Ah, you cruel woman, have I not worshipped and adored you these many days? Do I not ache here?" he struck his breast passionately. "Have you not made my life miserable with your looks and smiles and coldness and beauty?" He seized her hands roughly. "I love you so much that I--even I, Constantine Demetrius--could kill you--kill you."

She released herself with a cold laugh. "That sounds as though you were in earnest. But if I could return your love----"

"Ah!" he made a step towards her, trembling and breathing hard.

"One moment." She waved him back, and retreated herself to the window. "Supposing I could love you--what then?"

"I would--I would----" He flung out his hands with a sob. "What is your price?" he cried savagely.

"How crudely you put things!" said Lady Jim, coolly. "My price is your services, to be given blindly, and without question."

"And my reward?"

"Marriage with me."

Demetrius stared, and gazed at her with unaffected amazement. "You mock me," he said faintly.

"No, I am in earnest. It is true that I am not free now. But," she looked at him steadily, "you can make me so."

"Murder," whispered Demetrius, looking up and down the long, empty, chill gallery, and not at the Eve who was tempting him.

Leah blazed out into genuine rage. "What do you mean?" she cried, stamping her foot. "Not a hair of Jim's head shall be harmed."

"Then how--how----?"

"Sit down and listen," she said, pointing to a chair. "I have a deeper feeling for you than you think. No; leave my hand alone. We are now talking business."

"Business," echoed Demetrius, blankly.

Lady Jim nodded composedly. "The pleasure can come later. You have no money, no title, no position----"

"I can make money," he explained rapidly; "and I can take up again my title of Prince, which I dropped when I became a doctor. As the wife of a Russian noble-
---"

"You will have to make your peace with the Czar to get these things."

"I will do so."

"Through Mademoiselle Askakoff?"

"No; there are other ways. I am not worthy of Katinka----"

"And, therefore, think yourself worthy of me," said Lady Jim, calmly. "Thank you! There's nothing like being honest."

"But you do not understand----"

"Oh yes, I do. I understand that you can make me a cheap sort of princess, and in some way can give me money----"

"All that you require--as my wife."

"You must have the lamp of Aladdin, then," said Leah, with a shrug. "My capacity for spending will try even your finances. But at the present moment I have not a penny, neither has my husband."

"Well?" asked the doctor, anxiously.

Now that the plunge was made she found less difficulty in speaking plainly. Leaning towards him, till the perfume of her hair and the close neighbourhood of her whole gracious person nearly maddened him into seizing her in his arms, she proceeded rapidly. "My husband's life is insured for twenty thousand pounds. If you as a doctor can arrange to satisfy the insurance company of his death, so that we can get the money, he will disappear, and I, in the eyes of the world, shall be free to marry you."

"Do you mean that I should give him a drug, and----"

"No; I mean--Harold Garth."

"My peasant patient. Well?"

"How stupid you are," said Lady Jim, with unfeigned irritation. "This man Garth is very like Jim, and is apparently dying----"

"He can't live another two months."

"Then the matter is easily managed. Can't you see?"

"Yes," replied Demetrius, whose quick brain seized the feasibility of the scheme at once. "But will your husband give you up?"

Leah nodded, not wishing to be too explicit. "We have arranged that."

"And does he know that his disappearance means our marriage?"

"No! He thinks you are poor, and will do anything for money."

"Ah," said Demetrius, sarcastically. "Then the high-born nobleman does not credit me with being a gentleman?"

"What does it matter what he thinks?" said Lady Jim, impatiently. "We needn't trouble about him after he disappears. Can it be managed?"

"Yes, if you will promise to marry me when you are free and in possession of this money."

She gave him both hands. "I do promise."

He bent down and kissed them, passionately. "Consider it done."

"Without any scandal?"

"Assuredly. Listen! The Duke wishes to save the life of this Garth, because--he is fond of him."

"Yes, yes; I understand. Go on."

"I say to the Duke that a warm climate will work wonders," continued Demetrius, dramatically. "He will gladly consent, and with this Garth I go to----"

"To Nice, or Cannes, or----"

"No," said the doctor, sharply. "If I set foot on the Continent I may be captured by the secret police. I have no wish to take Garth with me to Siberia," he added sarcastically. "It is not a warm climate. The Azores--Madeira--Jamaica--Barbados--any such place, will make him better."

"I don't want him to be made better," said the other conspirator, naïvely.

"Leave that to me, madame. Garth will die as Garth, and be buried as Milor, your husband."

"No, no," said Leah, with a shudder. "I won't have murder."

"You are scrupulous," rejoined Demetrius, with a shrug. "But make your mind easy. Garth cannot live--he may die on the voyage----"

"Or he may live for months."

Demetrius shrugged his shoulders again. "In that case, I may have to assist nature."

"No," said Leah, again, and very determinedly. "I could never spend the money with any pleasure if I thought that you--you assisted nature," she ended faintly, not liking to use a strong word.

The Russian looked at her with silent surprise. He could not understand why she should be scrupulous in one thing and not in another. She contemplated a fraud on the insurance company, and bigamistic marriage with him, so it was impossible to guess why she should object to the inclusion of a third crime.

"And it would scarcely be murder," said Demetrius, continuing his train of thought aloud. "He is so ill, this poor Garth, that the relief of death----"

"Don't," interrupted Leah, who both looked and felt pale. "I won't have it. Let the poor man die in peace. If he dies otherwise, I shall refuse to marry you."

"You may do that in any case," said the doctor grimly. "What hold have I over you?"

"There is no need for you to have any hold," said Lady Jim, wincing, and feeling that she had indeed delivered herself into the power of the enemy. "But if you think I will not keep my promise you are mistaken. I swear to marry you."

"Ah, well," said Demetrius, with a penetrating look. "If you do not marry me, you cannot marry another, since your husband will always be alive."

He spoke with slow significance.

"Oh, you make him out to be immortal also," said she, with an uneasy laugh; then felt the necessity of bringing this interview to a conclusion. "We must part now. It will not do for us to be seen talking together."

"I agree," said Demetrius, gravely; "your proposal alters our relations entirely. In society, I will speak to you little."

Lady Jim nodded, and put her handkerchief to her lips with a feeling of nausea. Now that her scheme was taking shape, its outlines appeared rather repulsive. To read of such a plot conceived and detailed by a dexterous author was amusing

and stimulating; to engage in its execution meant worry, and a fearful ignorance as to what might happen, should things go awry. The same difference might be supposed to exist between Aldershot man[oe]uvres and a real battle. Theorising in criminality was easy; practice would be both difficult and dangerous.

Moreover, she might have to pay a very large price for the privilege of engaging in this questionable transaction. Demetrius would certainly exact his bond in genuine Shylock fashion. Needless to say, she had no intention of marrying him, and trusted to the providence of the peacock fetish to avoid the necessity though at the moment she saw no means whereby she could escape fulfilling her promise. This reflection almost made her draw back. As yet, she was not under the doctor's thumb, and could extricate herself even at this eleventh hour by denying everything, should he dare to speak out. But a second thought of her desperate need of money, a sordid vision of cheap hotels and ready-made frocks, a shuddering remembrance that the future, as it now stood, meant limited pocket-money and the everlasting boredom of Jim's society, turned the scale in favour of the venture. "Be bold! Be bold!" said the warning of the door in the old fairy tale, and Leah thought the advice worth taking. But she forgot the concluding words, "Be not too bold!"

"I leave details to you," she said to her companion, when they had concluded their nefarious bargain.

"Madame, I relieve you of all responsibility," said Demetrius, now quite his grave, restrained self. "But, should I tell the Duke that your husband is suffering from consumption, you will endorse my statement, I trust."

"Consumption? Jim? Oh, Lord, he's as healthy as a pig."

"He will not be if he takes a certain medicine," said the man, dryly.

Leah had a conscience, though for years it had been persistently snubbed into holding its peace. After all, Jim *was* her husband, and she had no right to sanction tricks being played on his robust health. "You don't mean----" Her voice died away nervously.

"I mean business," Demetrius flashed out. "I love you, and I mean to win you. The price that you ask shall be paid."

"Without harm to Jim or this man Garth?"

"I swear it."

"In that case"--Leah extended her hand, to withdraw it suddenly before the Russian could rain kisses on its soft whiteness. A choking sensation, new to one of her superb health, made her gasp frantically after the breath which seemed to be leaving her. With unexpected force came a new sensation. This abominable playing with the lives and hearts of men stirred up to vehement protest a hitherto unknown better self which overwhelmed her with wave upon wave of reproachful shame. Conscience, uppermost for once in her greedy, selfish, animal life, stripped the contemplated sin of its allurements, and she recoiled before an inward vision of the horror her baser nature was creating. It might prove to her what the monster proved to Frankenstein, and haunt her with nightmare insistence for the remainder of an unbearable life.

"So weak, madame?" asked Demetrius, reading the secret handwriting on the wall like a very Daniel.

The sneer nerved her, and she strove desperately to escape from the light of heaven into the material darkness, that would not reveal her sin, unclothed and shameless. "No!" she cried in a loud, ringing voice. "I--I----" Again the celestial light mercilessly and mercifully disclosed the inward foulness of that fair-seeming sin, and the sight beat down her pride and courage into nothingness. "I take it all back," she stuttered, broken-up and panic-struck. "Forget--don't move in--in----" Something clicked in her throat, and only by a violent effort did she repress the climbing hysteria. Incapable of speech, and only anxious to escape from this extraordinary influence, which compelled her to face the powers of darkness in their naked horror, she passed swiftly down the long, echoing gallery. Not till she was safe in her own room did she halt, to consider why she had fled. Her brain was now clear, and the actual world resumed its wonted aspect. Her face was still white, her lips still quivered, her soul was still shaken by the visitation. But, with a courage worthy of a better cause, she sat down and fought with her fears, till the colour returned and the nerves came under control. Yet her material nature could not grasp that the terrible gift of the interior sight had been hers for one short moment.

"I'm a fool!" she assured herself harshly.

And she was. For, as the walls of the flesh closed round her soul, to darken it anew, her good angel, who had wrought the miracle, weeping for the blind that

would not see and the deaf that would not hear, left her despairingly. Then the powers of darkness soothed her into such contentment, that she laughed scornfully at her late folly, and adopted their explanation.

"I'm run down with all this worry," said Lady Jim. "I really need a tonic."

CHAPTER XI

A triple knock at the door both interrupted Leah's meditations and annoyed her, as she was far from wishing for company. It could not be Jim, as he usually banged the panels impatiently, and walked in before the invitation to enter could be heard through the noise of his tattoo. Besides, Jim, for obvious reasons, connected with Askew, had made himself scarce for the last four-and-twenty hours. Should it be a visitor, Leah resolved to decline conversation, especially with one of her own sex. But the women of the house-party so rarely ventured into Lady Jim's sitting-room, that she concluded the disturber to be some servant with a message. Perhaps Jim had broken his head while skating, or had made a hole in the ice. If so, his death would greatly simplify matters.

"Come in," she cried impatiently, and to her surprise, Lionel presented himself, with a somewhat diffident look. "Oh, it's you, padre!" Lady Jim had picked up the word from a Sandhurst cadet. "What's the matter,--anything wrong?"

"What should be wrong?" inquired Kaimes, closing the door and remaining on the inside.

"Oh, I don't know. I always expect bad news when I see a lawyer's letter or a parson's face. Well? Has Lady Canvey been converted, or has Jim gone to that place where the climate forbids skating?"

"Nothing of the sort has happened," said Lionel, dryly. "I have merely come to chat with you."

"Sit down, then, though I warn you I don't feel companionable."

"You are worried."

"My dear man, when am I anything else but worried, with Jim for a husband, and the Duke behaving like Shylock at his worst? You and Jim have made a mess of things."

"I don't know about Jim," said Lionel, resenting this ungrateful speech, "but I did my best to put matters in the right light."

"Oh, Lord, who wanted a right light? The less light on Jim's and my affairs the better. A few white lies would have resulted in a larger sum than that miserable two hundred with which the Duke insulted us."

"I am not in the habit of telling lies, white or black, Lady James."

"I daresay. You parsons are so ridiculously punctilious. As if diplomatic lies were not as oil on the troubled waters of this world."

"I did not come to discuss this," said Lionel, seeing how utterly impossible she was, "but to help you in your trouble."

"What trouble?"

"I don't know. I was reading in the library, when a feeling came to me that I must see you at once--that you needed assistance."

Leah looked rather queer. What could he possibly know of her late experience?
"Telepathy, I suppose."

"Well, that may be the scientific name for the Divine Spirit."

"The what?"

"The Divine Spirit," he repeated, firmly and seriously. "I believe that the impulse to seek you came from above. You are in danger."

"Am I--of being bored to death?"

"You can't deny that you are in trouble of some sort. I can see it in your expression."

"My trouble is my own. I share it with no one."

"Then you are in----"

"Pray don't question me," snapped Leah, with a nervous glance around. This interference of the Unseen with her material affairs was both weird and uncomfortable. She could not deny the panic that had driven her headlong from the security of the flesh, and it was remarkable that Lionel, unsummoned and unsought, should seek her at so critical a moment. The feeling that he was meddling with what did not concern him, annoyed her the more. "I wish you would not frighten me," she cried, with an angry determination to stop this uncanny business.

"Perhaps it is your conscience that is frightening you."

"How dare you say that?"

"Because there is something serious the matter, or I should not have been called to your assistance."

"I never called you."

"Then your good angel did."

"I don't believe in such things."

"Do you believe in anything?"

"Yes," she said defiantly--"in myself."

"That is a poor help in time of trouble."

"I have managed very well hitherto."

"Can you substantiate that statement, seeing how embarrassed your worldly affairs are at this moment?"

Lady Jim could find no direct answer. "Parsons have nothing to do with worldly matters," she muttered, averting her eyes.

"Very true. But if I can offer spiritual consolation----"

"Take it to Lady Canvey. She needs it more than I do."

"I doubt that, or the call would not have come."

"It's a false alarm, padre," she said jeeringly. "I don't want to be preached at, and you're suffering from indigestion, or softening of the brain."

"Well, Lady James," said Lionel, rising with a sigh, "your limitations may lead you to look at the matter in that light. But if I can do nothing for you, I can only retire, after asking your pardon--as I do--for my intrusion;" and he made for the door.

Her mood changed with feminine rapidity, and she beckoned imperatively that he should remain. Disguise it as she would to Kaimes, his sudden coming on the top of her late puzzling experience drove her to acknowledge that something outside the material was at work. Leah was too clever a woman to deny the existence of more things in heaven and earth than came within the scope of her knowledge.

"It is the duty of you parsons to pry into the secrets of souls, I suppose," she said, leaning her elbow on the chair arm, and her chin on her hand. "But what interest can you have in my soul--if I have one?"

"I, as other servants of the Master, interest myself in all souls."

"That you may save them?"

"Only Christ can do that."

"I may deny His power to do so--I may deny Him."

"And so fall as Peter fell," said Lionel, sadly. "Yet he repented with bitter weeping."

"I am not a tearful woman," she retorted, and turned to look into the fire. She did not wish to meet his eyes when she spoke the ensuing acknowledgment. "You are a good man, Lionel, and--and--you may be able to help me."

Kaimes resumed his seat. "I hope so; but I can only point the way to a better Helper, and One more powerful."

She continued to gaze at the burning coals. "I was frightened a few minutes before you entered," she said abruptly.

"By what?"

"That is the question you must answer. By something which made me see what a horrid nature I have."

Lionel was silent for a few moments, not quite sure of his speech.

"The Unseen presses closely around us," he remarked at length, "and at times reveals itself. For instance, a contemplated sin may be prevented by a spiritual influence informing the intelligence how terrible the consequences of such a sin may be."

"It was the sin itself rather than its consequence which frightened me," murmured Leah, so softly that Lionel caught but one word.

"What is that you say about sin?"

Lady Jim's cunning made her shirk confession. "Nothing--oh, nothing," she said hurriedly; "only it seems to me that everything pleasant is a sin in your eyes."

"Dead Sea Fruit," replied Kaimes, earnestly; "fair to the eye, foul to the taste. If you turn devoutly to the spiritual, the material pleasures of this world lose their attractiveness."

"Perhaps," she said sceptically; "but many things goody-goody people of your sort shudder at are attractive. You can't deny that."

"I have no wish to. Satan always supplies us with rose-coloured spectacles, through which to contemplate his works."

Lady Jim rose and walked up and down the narrow limits of the room, twisting her hands in a nervous, hesitating way, quite unlike her usually calm, decisive self. "I wish you would not talk nonsense," she snapped; "it is absurd to believe in a personal devil."

"And in a possible hell also, I suppose you would say."

"Oh," she said carelessly, "scientists have explained that away."

"And the Inquisition of the middle ages denied that the earth went round the sun," said Kaimes, grimly; "but I understand that it does."

"Clever, but not convincing. What is the use of talking nursery theology and cheap science to me? What can you say that is likely to do me good?"

"The patient must be frank with his physician," hinted Lionel.

"Oh, we always tell the exact truth to doctor and lawyer," said Lady Jim, scornfully, "because we fear for our bodies and our property. But who tells the truth to a parson?"

"Those who are convinced of sin."

"In that case I may as well hold my tongue. I am not convinced of anything, not even if I ought to make you my father confessor."

"I cannot compel your confidence. On the other hand, I cannot help you unless---"

"Unless! Quite so. Let me think," and turning her back on him, she went to the window. The early winter gloom was blotting out the distant landscape, but near at hand the spectral glare of the snow revealed blackly the figures of homeward-bound skaters. The cold deadness of so sinister a world did not tend to soothe Leah's overstrung nerves, and shrouded Nature could give her no counsel. Had it been a summer's twilight of nightingales and roses, of sleeping blossoms and murmuring leaves, she would have recovered sufficient spirit to scoff. But this arctic waste, livid and still in the half light, reminded her of the frozen hell, in the deadly chills of which shuddered Dante, the seer. And the virile Saxon word hinted at the possible, if not at the probable. Of course, it was all very ridiculous, and her system was out of order. Nevertheless, she felt that some kindly human

comfort and advice might restore her tormented mind to its usual peace. And whatever she said to Lionel, he would not dare to repeat. As a cousin, as a gentleman, as a priest, his lips would be triply sealed. And he might be able to point out a less dangerous path than that towards which the need of money was driving her. He was a good fellow, too, and honest enough, in spite of his superstition. She decided to speak, and came back to her chair. Had she been less material, she could have heard in the stillness the rustling wings of a returning angel. Lionel looked at her inquiringly. She was about to speak hurriedly, lest the good impulse should pass away, when Jim's tattoo was heard. With a snap Leah closed her lips, as he lumbered, red-faced, hearty, and essentially fleshy, into the room. The mere sight of his tangible commonplace made the woman thank her stars that she had not blundered into hysterical frankness.

"Holloa, Lionel! Holloa, Leah! Sittin' in the twilight an' talkin' secrets--eh? Mind some light?" He clicked the ivory knob near the door, and the room sprang into vivid being. "Had a jolly day's skatin. Y' should ha' come, Leah. No end of a lark. Feel sick?" This polite question was asked because she shaded her eyes from the glare.

"No; but I can't stand wild bulls charging into a room."

"Might call it a china-shop," chuckled Jim, glancing disparagingly at the nicknackery. "Nerves slack, I'll bet. Fresh air an' exercise an' cheerful company is what you want, Leah."

"I'm likely to get the last, with you," she rejoined witheringly, for the overpowering vitality of the man made her wince.

"Well, Lionel here's--been no catch in th' way of fun, I expect. Seems to have given you the hump. Goin', old man? All right! I'll cheer her up. See you at dinner."

The curate nodded and went out. Since Jim's plunge into the middle of their conversation he had not uttered a word, for the interruption had jarred on him, as on Lady Jim. Moreover, he departed with an intuitive feeling that the golden moment had passed. And this was truly the case. When she next saw him, Leah wondered why she had so nearly made a fool of herself. And indeed, she was already wondering while Jim, obviously embarrassed, discoursed in a breezy, blundering way, with an attempt at connubial fondness.

"Poor old girl," he said, sitting opposite to her, looking fresh and handsome, and essentially manly. "Awfully sorry you're chippy. If I'd known I'd ha' come back to keep you company."

"Are the heavens falling?" asked Leah, listlessly.

Jim, as usual, could not follow this recondite speech. "Don't know what you're talkin' about," he remarked good-humouredly, and bustling to the bell. "You're a peg too low, Leah. Tell you what: we'll have tea here, an' a talk, if you don't mind."

His wife nodded, wondering if he was about to confess his possible Mormonism. She did not think so, as Jim never confessed anything, unless it was dragged piecemeal out of him. Her feelings at this moment did not lean towards cross-examination, so she let him ring the bell and order tea, without using her too-ready tongue. In fact, she unbent so far as to make use of him.

"Get me a dose of sal volatile, Jim," she ordered. "There's a bottle on my dressing-table."

"Poor old girl," said the sympathetic Jim, again, and stumbling into the next room with eager haste.

Leah smiled to herself. This ready obedience argued a guilty conscience.

After Jim dosed her, he was tactful enough to hold his tongue and improve the fire, without clattering the poker and tongs. Then he pulled down the blinds and drew the curtains, and altered the shades of the electrics, so that Leah might not be overpowered by the glare.

"It's quite like a new honeymoon," she said, sarcastically. The drug was doing its renovating work, and her original devil was returning to a swept and garnished house, with seven other spirits more wicked than himself.

Jim took the remark seriously, and coloured with pleasure. "I believe we'd get on rippin'," said he, enthusiastically. "If we only had the money I believe we'd be as happy as birds."

"They can't be very happy in this cold weather," replied Leah, seeing plainly that Jim's amiability was owing to a selfish fear of reproof for his iniquities. "Here's

the tea. I don't want any just now, as the sal volatile is doing me good. You can eat."

"Oh, can't I, just," said Jim, when the footman left and he was filling himself a cup. "Th' skatin's given me an appetite. 'Sides, I want to get into form; as I've somethin' serious to say about this insurance business."

Leah looked up suddenly. "I thought you had given that the go-by."

"No--o--o," drawled her husband, not meeting her eyes. "Course, th' pater's a good sort an' all that. But his arrangement will give us a howlin' bad time for the next few years."

"So I told you."

"Well, then," Jim fiddled nervously with a piece of toast, "why not get the twenty thousand?"

"It could be managed, of course, with some little difficulty."

"Through that Russian Johnny?"

"Demetrius? Yes."

"You've see him, then?"

"To-day. He'll see the thing through."

"What's his price?"

Leah smiled blandly, as she thought of what Jim would say did she reply honestly to this question. But she did not intend to. It seemed to her that Jim was driving her towards the very path which Lionel, unknowingly, wished her to avoid. It was useless to fight against fate, so she decided, and like many another person, she laid the blame on those scapegoats, the stars. She was now completely dominated by the selfish influence of the great god Mammon, and the lesser sin of lying was swallowed up in the greater one of idolatry.

"He'll want a few thousands, of course," she said mendaciously; "but, as yet, we have not fixed any sum."

"Hum," muttered Jim, suspiciously. "I thought he'd want something more than money."

Leah rose indignantly, and proclaimed a virtue that her conscience assured her she might yet lose. "I am an honest woman, Jim," she said haughtily, "and, married or unmarried, I should never allow any man to make love to me."

"Seems to me you do."

"Only to pass away the time. I stop short when----"

"When their hearts are broken," growled her husband. "Upon my soul, Leah, I'm straighter than you are."

"I doubt that, since you swear by what you haven't got."

Jim rashly became aggressively virtuous. "I've not been a bad sort of husband to you, Leah."

"I have seen so little of you that it is rather difficult for me to give an opinion," she said, resting her elbow on the mantelpiece. "Mrs. Berring may be in a better position to judge of your virtues."

Kaimes turned white with emotion, and he rose from his low chair as though worked by springs. "It's a lie," he growled hoarsely. "I never married her."

"Married who?"

"The lady you talk about."

"The lady Mr. Askew talked about, you mean. I merely mention her name."

"It is not her name. She is Lola Fajardo."

"Of the Estancia, San Jago. So Mr. Askew explained."

"Oh, if you're goin' to make a row----"

"Do I ever make rows?" asked Lady Jim, impatiently.

"You don't care enough about me to raise Cain," said Jim, rather sorry for himself. "I swear I'd be a different man, if you were a different woman."

"Every husband in the divorce court witness-box makes the same excuse. Sit down, Jim, and let us talk over the matter quietly. Your infidelities have long since converted us from man and wife into a business firm to earn money."

"But, Leah, I swear----"

"By that soul you know nothing about?" she flashed out contemptuously. "Talk sense, if you are capable of doing so. You have been trying to dodge this explanation ever since you met Mr. Askew last night, in the smoking-room. But now that we've stumbled on an opening, perhaps you will explain."

"Explain what?"

"All that Mr. Askew did *not* tell me."

"Oh, he's been makin' somethin' out of nothin', the silly ass," protested Jim, sitting down and handling the poker with a fervent wish that he could use it on the sailor's head. "I met Señorita Fajardo at Lima, and later at Buenos Ayres. Her brother asked me out to their estancia in the camp of Argentina, near Rosario, and I stopped there for a month. Bit of luck came my way, an' I pulled her from under a beastly mustang, that would have kicked the life out of her. She took a fancy to me, 'cause I saved her life."

"Is that all?"

"Well, I went again to San Jago, last year----"

"Your third visit to South America since our marriage."

"Yes," said Jim, sullenly; "an' I met Lola--I mean Señorita Fajardo."

"Oh, don't apologise. Lola is a pretty name."

"An' she's a pretty woman, an' I'm flesh an' blood," cried Jim, getting up to work himself into a rage. "I met her durin' my second visit, an' went again to the estancia on my third. It was no use luggin' a title round, for these mouldy hotel-keepers always make a chap pay for havin' a handle to his name, so I called

myself Berring--James Berring."

"James Berring, bachelor."

"Bachelor, certainly. I haven't married her, and if Askew says I have, he's a liar."

"And assuredly a marplot," said Leah, dryly, "since he has exploded your romance. I understood from him that this lady loves you."

"So she does."

"And you love her?"

Jim wriggled. "Oh, go on--go on! Kick a chap when he's down!"

"If I had intended to kick, you would have been black and blue by now, Mr. James Berring. But you needn't flatter yourself that my feelings are hurt in any way. You're not worth it."

"Other women think differently."

"Lola Fajardo, for instance."

"Well, I can't help that, can I? If you'd been a different sort of woman, I'd have---"

"You said that before. Had we not better get to business?"

"What business?"

"The insurance business. I don't care for you, and you show very plainly that you don't care for me. It is useless for us to struggle together like a couple of ill-matched dogs in leash. Give me fifteen thousand of this money, and then you can marry your Lola woman."

Jim turned white again. "You seem jolly anxious to get rid of me."

"Can you wonder if I do? How many women would take this scandalous matter as quietly as I do?"

"It's not scandalous," said Kaimes, fiercely. "She thinks that I am a bachelor, and I'm not even engaged to her. I have tried to be true to you, Leah," declared Jim, pathetically.

His wife shrugged her shoulders. It was rather late in the day for Jim to talk sentiment, besides being a waste of time. "Well?" she asked, facing him squarely.

Jim read her purpose in a very flinty face. "I'll do what you want," he said weakly.

"Then there's no more to be said," remarked Leah, coldly, moving towards the door of her bedroom. "Demetrius will explain, if you will afford him half an hour's private conversation."

"Leah, do you really mean it?"

"I have meant it from the first moment you put the idea into my head," she said in a harsh voice. "This underhand love-making of yours only makes me the more determined."

"But there was no----"

"Don't lie, Jim. A man can no more love two women than he can serve two masters. Is it to be Lola Fajardo, or myself?"

"I leave it to you, Leah."

"Then I choose the fifteen thousand pounds," she said, and vanished into the bedroom. Jim took an impulsive step towards the door, but the sharp click of a turning key showed him that he was locked out for ever.

That evening Leah talked so gaily, and looked so beautiful, that her father-in-law was absolutely fascinated. "Is it all right between you and James?" he asked graciously.

"Yes," Leah assured him; "we understand one another thoroughly."

CHAPTER XII

Leah welcomed the New Year at Firmingham, with the fervent hope that its bounty would bestow the insurance money, and rid her of an official husband. It really seemed as though Providence, or the fetish, was in a benign mood, for Jim caught the worst of colds while skating. Being confined to an undesired bed, and fed with food tasteless to a cultivated palate, he lost both flesh and temper. Demetrius talked gravely of weak lungs, and hinted at inherited consumption. The Duke was anxious, but scarcely surprised, and recalled similar cases of a grandmother, two ancestors, and a rackety uncle. Lady Jim encouraged these pulmonary recollections for obvious reasons. She and Demetrius winked privately at one another like the celebrated augurs, when they heard the old man's lamentations. Nature was acting strictly on the lines of the Russian's proposed medicine, and there was no need to dose Jim into a sickly likeness of Garth. Day by day he grew as white-faced, as haggard, and as lean, until he became alarmed at the anxiety of Providence to forward the schemes of himself and Leah.

But there was no end to the kindness of an overruling fate. Jim's illness afforded his wife the opportunity of posing as a sister of mercy, and she fussed round the patient so ostentatiously, that the Duke was quite touched. He began to think that Leah was a true ministering angel, and not the money-wasting doll he had considered her to be. Jim grinned as Leah measured medicine, and fed him with gruel, and read him interesting bits from the sporting journals.

"I believe I'm goin' to get well," he chuckled.

"Why so, dear?" asked his wife, who was profuse of adjectives in private, so that they might slip out the more easily in public.

"You look so uncommon dismal."

"It is necessary to keep up appearances," Leah assured him. "Besides, this will be the last chance of my doing anything for you. In future, Lola will soothe your weary pillow;" after which and similar passages of arms, Jim would curse himself to sleep, and wake up to accuse his wife of wishing to poison him.

This fortunate illness kept Lady Jim at Firmingham when the house-party disintegrated. But as the Duke was a twaddling old ass, and Jim the most trying of patients, Leah looked upon her ten days' boredom as a kind of Lenten penance. Besides, she had frequent confabulations with Demetrius, to settle details of the plot. Already the doctor had explained to the Duke that Garth would die easier in the tropics, and Funchal had been selected as the most agreeable place for his demise.

"And then?" asked Lady Jim.

"Your husband must go to Jamaica, to wait events."

"What events?"

"Those which I propose to bring about," retorted Demetrius, who had his reasons for not explaining himself too fully.

Leah did not question him closely. With a selfish regard for her own safety, in case anything might leak out, she preferred that the doctor should arrange matters in his own way. But she obeyed instructions to the extent of hinting to the Duke that Kingston was the very best place for dear Jim's weak lungs.

"Will you go with him?" asked Pentland, anxiously.

"Oh no," said Lady Jim, sweetly; "we mustn't make too much fuss over him, else he'll think he's going to die."

"He might," sighed the Duke. "I had an uncle----" and he described the sufferings of old Lord George for the tenth time.

Leah comforted him after the manner of one Bildad, a Shuhite. "Oh, Kingston will do Jim no end of good, my dear Duke. It won't cure one lung, but it may patch up the other. And then, you know, if he gets worse, I can always reach him in fourteen days."

"Does Demetrius think he will die?" asked the Duke, piteously.

"He doesn't think poor Jim will ever be so strong as he was," said Leah, gravely; "but he'll hang on, with care."

"Just like my grandmother," muttered the Duke, and then detailed the sufferings of a dowager duchess, who couldn't be kept alive beyond the age of sixty.

"If Jim lives till that age, I shall be content," said Leah.

"Are you thinking of the insurance money?" demanded Pentland, with sudden anger.

"What insurance money? Oh yes, I think Jim did mention something about an insurance."

"He gets it if he lives till sixty."

"Really! I don't quite understand, Duke, but I'm sure it's all right."

"I hope so, my dear. Has he made his will?"

"No. Why should he?"

"Because, in the event of his dying, the insurance money should be left to you. No will means trouble."

Leah had never thought of a will, as it seemed natural that the money should come to her without the necessity of paying lawyers' bills. But her quick brain seized the chance of smoothing the way to acquiring the fortune with as little trouble as possible, and she promptly cornered the Duke. "*You* speak to him," she suggested.

And this the Duke did, with the result that a will leaving the money to Leah was drawn up and signed, after some opposition, by Jim. He did not at all relish the carrying out of this necessary step. It was too like preparing a death certificate to please Jim.

However, as a reward for his obedience, Demetrius set him on his legs, and Jim went to Torquay with the devoted Leah. But when he was settled in a

comfortable hotel as an interesting invalid, and with a superfluity of pretty girls to soothe him with sympathy, Lady Jim left him for a round of visits to various country-houses. Now that the Duke was out of sight, Jim's connubial comforts were out of mind; but Leah left strict injunctions that he was not to put on flesh. Within the month, she was to see him start for Jamaica, and impressed upon him the necessity of looking quite ready to depart for a place where Jim had no desire to go.

"I don't see why you want to make a holy show of me," grumbled Jim.

"We must make your death appear as plausible as possible."

"But I don't want to look like a livin' skeleton."

"Oh, I don't think Lola will mind," said Leah, cruelly, and started out to enjoy herself in the best of spirits.

While at Lord Sargon's seat in Shropshire, she met Askew in the company of the fixture. The young man's betrothed was extremely like a dairy-maid, and her frocks set Lady Jim's teeth on edge. If she could combine colours that did not match, she always did so, and her character was as colourless as her wardrobe was gaudy. Marjory was the creature's name, and her conversation was the "Pa-pa!" "Mam-ma!" of a squeaking doll.

"How much are you paying for her?" asked Leah, after satisfying herself that the young lady was really a woman.

"Five thousand a year," replied the lieutenant, sulkily.

"What a bargain!"

"Don't laugh at me," he implored; "you know there is but one woman in the world for me."

"So you told me. Lola--what's her name?"

"Some one nearer and dearer than her!" he murmured, with what the Americans call "goo-goo" eyes, whereat Lady Jim laughed, and allowed him to fetch and carry, and sit on his hind legs and bark prettily, like a well-trained lap-dog. It amused her, and kept him on tenterhooks. The only annoying thing was, that

Marjory seemed to care little for this annexation of her lover. She much preferred a fox-hunting squire, who talked "stables," and glowered on Askew for not appreciating the dairy-maid.

In this capture of another woman's man, Leah combined pleasure with business. She did not wish to spoil Jim's little game with the Spanish lady, and it would never do for Askew to detail Mr. Berring's past in a quarter where such betrayal would lead to trouble. By this time the amorous sailor was the slave of beauty, so Lady Jim was sufficiently mistress of his will to limit his correspondence. This she did one evening after dinner, while admiring Marjory's new frock.

"Yellow and green," murmured Leah, when she and Askew filled up a corner, and watched frantic people playing bridge; "poached egg on spinach. If you design her gowns, Mr. Askew, I should advise a less lavish use of primary colours."

"She means well," he muttered, apologetically.

"People who need excuses for existing always do," retorted Lady Jim; "but she is really a sweetly simple girl, with two ideas, neither of which includes you, my dear boy. I am sure you will be very happy together, doing cake-walks."

"Doing cake-walks?"

"That sort of dress always makes me think of South Carolina and the 'old Kentucky home,' you know. They invented cake-walks there, I believe. But I forgot--you prefer places below the equator."

"I never think of South America," he protested.

"Of course not. The jewel is more attractive than the casket. When did you last hear from Señorita Fajardo?"

"I never had a letter from her in my life."

"She is cautious, it seems. Are you?"

"I don't write to her, if that is what you mean. I did love her----"

"What a polite thing to say to me!"

"But I don't any longer. You see, I thought that Berring--your----"

"There's nothing in that," said Lady Jim, quickly. "There never really was, and if you really love this estancia lady, why not marry her?"

"I am engaged already."

"To me, or to that pretty, vivacious girl over there?"

As Marjory was looking particularly like a wooden Dutch doll at the moment, Askew reddened.

"I wish you wouldn't say these things, Lady Jim----"

"Lady James!"

"Lady James, then. Marjory can't help herself."

"It seems to me she has--to that intelligent young man with the face like a sheep and the manners of a costermonger."

"They were boy and girl together."

"And are still, from the infantile look of them. I quite expect to see their nurse arrive. You know, it won't do," said Leah, gravely; "here I am making fun of Marjory, and you aren't man enough to stand up for her."

The young man coloured still deeper, and mumbled something about a woman's privilege. Shortly he made a lame excuse, and left Leah to devote himself to Marjory, who was not grateful for the attention. Leah did not mind. She had learned that Askew did not correspond with Lola Fajardo, and had no intention of doing so; therefore there was little likelihood that Jim's fettered past would ever become known at the Estancia, San Jago. Being really a good-natured woman with her affections thoroughly under control, Leah half decided to loosen her apron-strings and let Askew lead his bargain to the altar. But this she did not do, for two obtrusive reasons, firstly, the fox-hunting squire and Marjory were made for one another; and secondly, it would be just as well to keep the sailor under her eye for the next year. She did not wish him to hark back to Lima, for melodramatic purposes.

After a very pleasant visit, thanks to Askew's infatuation, Lady Jim returned to Curzon Street. There she found a letter from Demetrius announcing that he and Garth had sailed for Madeira early in the previous week, and that it would be as well if Lord James Kaimes journeyed forthwith to Jamaica. Leah promptly sent an answer to her accomplice at Funchal, a telegram to Jim, a paragraph to a society paper, and a lengthy letter of sorrowful forebodings to the Duke. Then she sat down to wait events, and, meanwhile, considered the situation.

Pentland was all right, thanks to her cajoling. Before she left Firmingham he had arranged to free the income, to pay the debts, and to allow her to occupy the Curzon Street house until such time as Jamaica should kill or cure Jim. That interesting invalid had gone halves over the cheque, and Leah's purse still contained over fifty pounds, which would do for the present. But she intended to get a few hundreds from the Duke, by playing off Jim's sickly looks and her own lonely condition of grass-widowhood. It was really very satisfactory, and she found it hard to look miserable, as in duty bound, when Pentland arrived to see the last of Jim. Leah arranged that the parting between father and son should be in town. She did not want to have a bereaved father bothering at Southampton. The journey back to town after Jim's dispatch would be boring at the best, and her consolatory powers were not great.

"You look disgustingly fit," said Leah, when Jim was established on the drawing-room sofa, with a rug and a few unnecessary medicine bottles, and other sick-room paraphernalia.

"Sorry I can't be more of a corpse," growled the invalid; "but it's not easy to pretend you're a goner, when y' feel fit to jump over the moon."

"Try and cough louder," suggested his wife.

"Shan't! It hurts m' throat. Hang it, I've lost three stone. I believe you want me dead in real earnest."

Lady Jim thought for a moment. "No, I don't," she said, truly enough. "You haven't treated me over well, and I should have been a different woman, had you been a different man----"

"Divorce court lingo," said Jim, remembering what she had said at Firmingham, and with a derisive laugh.

"All the same, I hope you'll have a good time in South America."

"Why not in Jamaica?"

"Because you've got to be thoroughly sick there. Demetrius will come along later with Garth's corpse, and----"

"Ugh! Drop it! What about the money--my share?"

"I'll get the cash, as soon as you are sent home."

"Me? What for? Ain't I goin' to disappear?"

"Of course," said Leah, impatiently; "but Demetrius has to embalm your body and bring you home to the family vault."

"I say, don't," cried Jim uneasily; "that's the other Johnny you're talkin' about. Leah," he looked round cautiously, "I hope Demetrius won't polish off that poor fellow. He's a sort of relative of mine, y' know."

"Don't worry your head," said Lady Jim, calmly. "Garth's dying as fast as he can; he may be dead by this time, for all we know. And don't think that I would allow Demetrius to be so wicked," she cried, with virtuous indignation. "I'm not a criminal."

"Oh, Lord!" was all Jim could find to say, as he thought of what they were doing, and conversation ended for the time being. Leah went to the theatre and supper at the Savoy that evening, leaving Jim to practise coughing amongst the useless medicine bottles.

Next day, both Pentland and his eldest son arrived at eleven, and were informed by a sad-faced wife that her dear husband would travel to Southampton by the afternoon train. At the sight of Leah's dismal looks and attentive care, Frith expressed his opinion that women were protean.

"Never thought you cared so much for Jim," he said bluntly.

"Oh, I don't for a moment say that I think Jim is a good man," was Leah's artistic reply; "and we've had our tiffs, like other married people. But Jim's my husband, after all. And he has his good points."

"What are they?"

Lady Jim was not prepared with a catalogue of her husband's perfections. "Oh, I don't know," she murmured vaguely; "he drinks in moderation, you know. That's something."

"There's no virtue in resisting a non-existent temptation," said the Marquis, grimly. "Jim doesn't come of a drinking family."

"Of a consumptive one, I believe," retorted Leah, softly.

Frith was nettled at the implied slight. "Not at all," he said, with unusual gruffness. "Look at me."

"But that poor Garth----"

"Oh, he--I don't understand--and if you----" Frith coloured as he met her derisive eyes, and devoted himself to his brother.

Lady Jim left the affectionate trio together, lengthening out their farewells, and retired, laughing, to her room. It was really amusing to think that Jim, who was as healthy as a trout in a pond, should be wept over, and coddled, and pitied, and generally elevated to a sainthood. The business was serious enough, no doubt; but Leah could not help seeing the humorous side. She felt unequal to keeping a grave face while the comedy in the drawing-room was being played, and therefore did not rejoin her husband till the principal comedians had departed.

"We are a couple of rotters," said Jim, gloomily, when she appeared.

"Speak for yourself, my dear," she retorted coolly. "Well, and what did they say?"

"Never you mind. You'd only snigger over a father takin' leave of his dyin' son."

"Oh! I did not know that the Duke had seen Harold Garth."

"Leah," cried her husband, fiercely, "you're a--never mind. Whatever you are, I'm another."

"Did the Duke leave a cheque for me?" asked Leah, more business-like than sympathetic.

Jim banged about among the medicine bottles. "Five hundred."

"Dear man," cried his wife, snatching the cheque from his very reluctant hand. "I must go and dress for the journey."

"Won't you kiss me, Leah?" quavered Jim, really moved, and quite forgetting the rascally plot in which he was taking so prominent a part.

At the door she turned with an expression of withering scorn. "Keep your kisses for your wife, Mr. Berring!" cried this too-previous widow, and left him to digest the insult at his leisure.

CHAPTER XIII

The paragraph sent by Leah to her pet editor intimated concisely to the tuft-hunting world of Tom, Dick, and Harriet, that the suddenly developed pulmonary complaint of Lord James Kaimes necessitated his wintering in Jamaica. This intelligence surprised the clubs, as Jim's hectoring voice and devotion to damp field sport had always suggested aggressively sound lungs.

"Never knew him to be chippy in his life," growled one man, who admired Leah as much as he hated Jim for possessing her. "What's his game this time, I wonder?"

"Perhaps he wants to get away from his wife," hinted a pigeon of Jim's plucking. "Bit of a tongue, hasn't she?"

"Tongue be hanged! She has both wit and beauty."

The pigeon sniggered, knowing the speaker's devotion to Delilah. "Oh, Kaimes appreciates those qualities--in another man's wife."

"Scandal! Scandal!" murmured a meek member, blessed with a spouse whose looks prevented temptation. "Kaimes has dined with us many times, but I never saw----"

"No; *you* wouldn't," struck in a sporting baronet, whom Leah snubbed on every possible occasion. "Jim likes red-haired women."

"Then why doesn't he stick to the one he's legally entitled to?"

"Because she sticks to him. If she'd only syndicate her admirers in the D. C., Jim 'ud be after her like an Indian mosquito in search of a new arrival. I'll bet there's some petticoat in this Jamaica business;" and the sportsman looked round for some one to pander to his besetting sin--but no one gave him a chance of committing it.

Contradiction and argument arrived with the oldest inhabitant of Clubland, whose memory was as exasperating as his verbosity. "Wrong! All wrong," he purred, like the tame cat he had been for half a century. "Kaimes is really consumptive. I remember his grandmother dying of tuberculosis. It's in the family, along with gout and water on the brain."

"Oh, bosh! If Jim was sick, he'd sin more judiciously."

"I never knew that damnation depended upon health," was the retort. "Take a case in point. During the Great Exhibition----"

Leah's admirer cut short a much-dreaded anecdote. "She'll make a lovely widow."

"I don't believe in second-hand brides myself," said the horsey man, venturing an epigram. "'Sides, her tongue--cuts like a knife. Even the mares shy when she kicks."

"Wit! wit!" explained the admirer, who misread French memoirs. "She is Madame de Rambouillet--without a history."

"Hum! She hasn't published one yet, but I dare say----"

"Tut! tut!" interrupted the ancient. "Madame de Rambouillet was, and Lady James is, entirely respectable."

"And the horse is the noblest of all animals," snapped the baronet.

"Maybe, though the beast doesn't improve your morals," and the laugh was with the oldest inhabitant.

"Wonder if Kaimes will die," pondered the man who saw Leah as a probable widow and a possible wife.

"Lay you ten to five he won't."

"You will lose; you will most assuredly lose," said the octogenarian. "Very consumptive family, the Kaimes. And our friend is just the sort of healthy man to depart suddenly."

"Where to?" asked the pigeon.

"Hu-s-s-sh!" droned the meek member; "that's a serious question."

"To Jim!" finished the racing man, smartly; "but I don't care. Jim, dead or alive, is equally useless to me."

"Oh! He isn't in your debt, then?"

"Catch me trusting him--not much. But what's the use of talking obituary notices? Let's bridge."

"If your play is as bad as your grammar, I prefer to stand out," said Methuselah, and the symposium broke up, in time to prevent bickering between crabbed age and irreverent youth.

There were many such talks during the nine minutes' wonder of Jim's unexpected sickness, and it was generally considered that he would return in spirits of wine to the family vault. Leah did not hear these encouraging prognostications, so conducive to the entire success of the plot. She was tolerating life at San Remo, under the hired roof of a truly great dame, who wished to disentangle her from the golden nets of ultra-fast society. A grass-widow has to be more careful to keep up appearances than the genuine crape article, even at the risk of being bored by highly placed humanity, as dull as stainless. Lady Hengist and her friends belonged to that seventh heaven where newly rich Peris and the Mammons who cocker them seek admittance in vain. Social laws differ from those of nature, inasmuch as the gilded scum does not invariably rise to the top. Hence the creation of the over-discussed smart set, which is taken by the suburban reader of back stairs journalism as representative of the British aristocracy.

Lord Hengist came of an autochthonous family which had been at home when William the Conqueror raided the ancestral cabin. His wife was descended from a knight who emigrated from Normandy in 1066, with apparently several million others, judging by the claims put forward by those who enter the peerage. This alliance--they were too great to talk of mere marriage--resulted in two children, not made of ordinary clay, but compounded of the superlative porcelain sort. Their parents possessed a genuine mediæval castle, as uncomfortable as the builders knew how to make it, and which had the rare distinction of possessing a state-bedroom in which Elizabeth had never slept. The family archives read like the Book of Numbers, and their ancestors had made history at opulent wages for

the benefit of the Hengist coffers. The men had sided with the Stewarts and ratted to the Guelphs; the women bloomed in Lely and Kneller portraits in loosely slipping clothes, with pastoral accessories; and finally, the present head of the house, with four seats, two children, a charming wife and a large income, lived comfortably on the loot of ages. Of all these things Lord and Lady Hengist were so proud that they had no need to exhibit pride.

Well-born as Leah Kaimes was, the pleasant, if somewhat stately and stiff, life of these genuine rulers wearied her intensely. Bread and milk is insipid after a repast of ortolans in aspic, and a motor-flight is more exhilarating than a donkey-ride. Moreover, it annoyed her to see how sensibly the Hengists spent their many pounds a day. They could have had much more fun for the money, had they known the right shops; but they patronised out-of-date establishments, where the goods were of an excellent quality, but just five minutes behind the newest things. Of course, this was Leah's figurative way of saying that the Hengists came out of the Ark. They always bought the wrong things at the wrong shops, and had a middle-class eye to the lasting quality of the goods they purchased. They were clothed rather than dressed, and being colour-blind, invariably chose garments which matched abominably with their complexions. In a word, the Hengists were so commonplace as to be original. Lady Jim could not understand why they should have been thrust into positions which they could not fill. It was like bringing cows into the drawing-room.

"It's so hard for me to taste the pleasures of self-denial," complained Hengist, one day, as they sauntered on the promenade.

"I don't think it is wise to attempt the extraction of sunbeams from cucumbers," said Leah, dryly.

"Dean Swift said that, but he was an egotist," replied Hengist, in his serious way, that reminded Lady Jim of Lionel at his worst. "It is more blessed to give than to receive, you know."

"Is it, indeed? Who said so?"

"The wisest and most loving of mankind. And it is a true saying. I assure you, that if I deny myself something I greatly desire, and send the money which would have purchased the gratification to a charity, I feel absolutely happy."

"I don't think I ever tried that experiment."

"You will not know true happiness till you do, Lady James."

"Then I must make a bid for Paradise," she answered, privately thinking that the man talked sad nonsense.

"It's a dreadful thing to be able to have the moon for the asking," went on Hengist, reflectively.

"That's your epigrammatic way of putting it, I suppose; but the moon won't drop from her sphere for me, howl as I may. You are very lucky to command the planet, Lord Hengist."

"So the world thinks, but it forgets that there is the curse of satiety."

"Is there? I never knew it existed. I only wish I could cram the twelve hours of the day with twenty-four of pleasure."

"Have you ever had everything you wished for, Lady James?"

"No!" said Leah, promptly. "I'd have the sun as well as the moon, and the stars thrown in, if I had my way."

"Only to be bored by the acquisition of the lot."

"Me bored--oh dear no! I am too stupid. It is only clever people like yourself who suffer from ennui. I only wish I were a Roman empress, with provinces for a dowry. Those dear women knew how to live."

"But in the majestic pages of Gibbon----"

"Who? Oh, that man who came to think he was the Roman Empire. Now his work would bore me--I'm not stupid enough to appreciate him."

"Julia"--this was Lady Hengist--"Julia and I read Gibbon during the honeymoon, and received much instruction."

"Oh, Lord!" said Lady Jim; "as though honeymoons were not disagreeable enough without that!" The idea made her laugh consumedly. In her mind's eye she saw this new Paolo and Francesca reading heavy prose in ten volumes. But Hengist did not even smile--he had absolutely no sense of humour. Besides, he

considered his companion's chatter painfully frivolous, and sighed to think that she had such a light nature. Leah, still laughing, glanced sideways. "I shall begin to think you are discontented, Lord Hengist."

"I am, that I cannot do the good I should like to do. Both Julia and I wish to benefit mankind."

"The twelve labours of Hercules, with no thanks for their accomplishment."

"We don't want thanks, but results," said Hengist, austere; "and we can commence in a small way. Next summer we intend to invite five hundred Whitechapel children to the Castle. Will you come and help us to entertain them, Lady James?"

"Delighted," yawned Leah, for the man spoke like a copy-book; "but I hope you'll wash them first. It will prevent disease, and give some new soap a philanthropic advertisement."

Hengist eyed her suspiciously. He was a very, very dull young lord, large-hearted and unintelligent, who took life so seriously that he had almost forgotten how to laugh. England clean, England contented, England happy. He constantly started crusades to bring on a premature millennium, and earned his reward, after the manner of reformers, by being abused in halfpenny newspapers as one who attempted to avert certain revolution, by stuffing the starving with sweets. Lady Jim thought him a bore and a prig, and too virtuous to be amusing. But that he and his wife were of use to her, she would not have endured this presentation of his year-before-last's Tree-of-Knowledge apples. He never plucked fresh fruit, and his Eve was quite as blind as he in discerning up-to-date harvests. Still, Hengist was a sort of bell-wether, leading a flock of prize sheep towards a closely guarded fold. Leah liked the fun and money and adulation of the smart set, but she had no notion of being a shut-out Peri from that dull paradise that the newly rich longed for. Besides, its very dullness gave a fillip to her enjoyment of the larkly amusements of those who could not enter the sacred ark.

"I am really very fond of children," she said, to do away with the effect of her last remark. "I wish I had some myself," and she sighed very prettily. "Hilda Frith is more fortunate than I, with her two dear babies."

"Both girls. I fancy Frith would like a son and heir."

"I'm sure he would, and both Jim and I would be the very first to congratulate him."

"Your husband is next in succession?"

"Yes, poor dear! But Frith is strong and healthy, while darling Jim--oh, I can't bear to talk about it."

This was perfectly true. To invent sentimental domestic histories and bewail a husband she detested was difficult, even to a woman of Leah's imagination and tact. But Hengist thought it was very good of her to talk so generously, and paid her serious compliments till she began to think that some unpardonable sin had thrown her into the society of this prosing creature. It was like reading the dictionary, or drinking Homburg waters, or paying bills. The sight of a friend made her gasp with relief, after the manner of a pearl-diver rising to take the air.

"Here's Lady Richardson and Sir Billy," she said with a frown, for her companion's benefit. "So horrid, to interrupt our nice conversation!"

"We can pass them," replied Hengist, decidedly pleased.

"Oh, I don't think so," was Leah's quick reply. "It would look rude; and then, Fanny Richardson never passes any one who will listen to her prattle of chiffons. Besides, Billy is a nice boy--quite a little man. Don't you think so?"

"Too much a man for his years," said her companion, austere. "I do not like Chesterfields in their teens. The lad's manners are too good--much too good."

"Can any child be much too good?"

"In the wrong way of over-artificiality, yes. Sir William----"

"He likes to be called Sir Billy!"

"So flippant. His mother should insist----"

"She! She never insists on anything, except having the newest dye and the best-cut frock, and a few dozen male ears to pour her babble into. Billy can do no wrong in her eyes, nor in mine. He is such an admirer of women."

"And at the age of thirteen," groaned Hengist.

"Come now, even you must have made love to some pretty pastry-cook's daughter when you were at Eton. There must be some of the old Adam in you, Lord Hengist."

"I was never an entirely modern child," replied the serious man, evasively, and with a sad eye on the trim figure of the rapidly approaching Billy. "To think that he should take dinner pills, and know the difference between sweet and dry champagne! What will the next generation be?"

"Boys and girls," said Leah, flippantly. "Good day, Fanny."

The vivacious little fairy who warmly greeted Lady Jim and her solemn escort was as pretty and fragile and dainty as a Dresden china shepherdess, and quite a credit to the maid who re-created her every morning. There was nothing natural about her, save her genuine adoration of Billy, and that arose from a knowledge that royalty had made it fashionable to exploit the nursery. Blonde and plump, jimp and graceful, dressed in perfect taste, and coloured in the latest fashion, she was popular even with her own discriminating sex. Hengist thought her a respectable doll, with no particular vices, and did not object to having her at the Castle. But he disapproved of Billy the precocious, which was decidedly unfair, as Billy could scarcely help shaping himself to the mould into which he had been slipped by a mother who required his assistance to play the pretty comedy of the widow's only son.

"How are you, Leah darling? So sweet you look, and Lord Hengist too. A most unexpected meeting, and so delightful," babbled Lady Richardson, who talked more and said less than any society gramophone. "Billy and I are just going to Monte Carlo, to plunge on the red. Reggy Lake is to meet us at the station; such a nice boy--Lancers, you know--a great chum of Billy's. Won't you come too, Leah, to brighten Billy up? He's got the hump, poor boy, as his new nerve-tonic doesn't suit him, and such a lovely, lovely day as it is too. Don't you think so, Lord Hengist?"

The respectable Hengist's hair bristled at this incoherent speech, and did not lie down again at the look in Billy's eyes. Dressed in a particularly smart Eton suit, gloved and silk-hatted and patent-leather-booted with fashionable accuracy, the boy appraised Lady Jim's beauty in a calm way, which would have made a

captain of dragoons blush. Behind his graceful, nonchalant, handsome mask of youth was hidden an old, old man, and in many ways Hengist was his junior. He certainly blushed when Leah gave him an amused glance, but this was Billy's way of mashing the sex. He knew the value of youthful diffidence, backed by mature knowledge.

"Should not your little boy be at school?" asked Hengist, scandalised into an implied snub.

Sir William looked at the troubled face of his elder with the serenity of a cherub. "Goin' back nex' week," said he, carefully dropping his "g's." "Th' little mother wanted me to look after her for a bit."

"Billy can't trust me out of his sight," giggled Lady Richardson. "He's so afraid I'll give him a second father."

"Not Reggy Lake, anyhow. He's a rotter!"

"What's a rotter, Sir Billy?" asked Lady Jim, enjoying the disgusted looks of Hengist.

"A fellow who rots."

"What an admirable definition?"

Billy rapidly dropped his left eyelid, and showed a set of white teeth. "I don't carry coals to *your* Newcastle," he said parabolically. "Say, Lady Jim, chuck this chappy, and come to Charlie's Mount."

The wink and the speech were lost on Hengist, for he was being worried by Lady Richardson. She danced before him, a pretty figure gowned in burnt-almond red, and would have distracted his heart with daintiness but that Julia kept that article in the nursery.

"Do join us, Lord Hengist," she pleaded seductively. "Such fun, when you know the ropes. Billy can show them to you."

"Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings," quoted Hengist, ironically. "Quite a new reading, Lady Richardson."

"Now you are horrid," said the widow, who did not know in the least what he meant. "I'll tell your wife. By the way, how is she, and the darling, darling twins? Twins are too sweet. I wish Billy was a twin."

"One of Sir William is quite sufficient."

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about, and it's very horrid of you to say so. Billy is adored."

"Is he ever whipped?"

Lady Richardson gave a scream. "How barbarous! The man who tried to whip Billy would have to order his coffin beforehand. Billy can handle his bunches of fives, I can tell you, Lord Hengist."

"His what?"

"It's Billy's way of putting boxing. You should see him give the postman's knock! Oh, he *is* clever! He can drive a motor, too, and pick out the winner five times out of ten."

"Does he know the kings of England?"

"No; he hasn't been to Court yet, and of course, there's only one. How funny you are! Well," Lady Richardson put her head on one side like a coaxing cock-robin, "are you coming with Billy and me? Do, oh do! We have afternoon tea with Monsieur Aksakoff and his daughter."

"What's that?" asked Leah, overhearing the names; "the Russian man?"

"Stiff sort of fella'!" said young Eton. "Nothin' birdish about him. Daughter's a clipper, though. Say, little mother, we'd best get. Th' train won't wait, y' know."

Before he had finished speaking Lady Jim had made up her mind. She had not heard from Demetrius, and it was not impossible that he had written to Katinka. In spite of his discouraging love-making he kept in with her, on the chance that she might be able to procure his pardon, and in any case she was useful in keeping him posted in the doings of the Third Section. The girl was so infatuated that she never saw he was making use of her in this way, and constantly wrote to him about any official gossip she heard. There was something pathetic in her

devotion and heart-whole love for the man who deceived her. But Leah did not look at the matter in this way. She knew that Katinka, if any one, would have news of the doctor, and being anxious to learn how Garth was progressing towards the grave, she turned to Hengist.

"I think I'll go over," she said in a low voice. "Jim asked me to see M. Aksakoff on some business. Would Julia mind?"

"Not at all," said Hengist, heartily, and quite deceived. "I would escort you, only I have some letters to write about the distress in London."

"Oh, Billy will look after us," said that young gentleman's mother.

"I *have* driven a team before now," observed Billy, with dignity.

I Hengist gave him a reproving look (which Billy bore very stoically), and whispered to Leah as they parted, "Don't encourage that lad."

"I don't think he needs much encouragement," said Lady Jim, laughing, and the two women walked away with Billy between them. Hengist stood where he was and frowned.

"Charming woman, Lady James," he murmured, gazing after Leah's amethystine gown; "but that lad--ugh!" He shook his head over young England up-to-date; then returned to the villa to hear the twins say the alphabet. Life had its compensations, even for a millionaire peer.

CHAPTER XIV

After the happy-go-lucky fashion of Italian officialism, the train was detained for some time at Ventimiglia. Lady Richardson, unsettled as a fly, changed her seat five times, and complained garrulously.

"Captain Lake is so very particular," she explained, producing a pocket-mirror and a powder-puff to repair possible damages. "He can't bear to be kept waiting five minutes."

"Then I should make him wait five hours," replied Leah, calmly. "It doesn't do to spoil men."

"You spoil me," said Sir Billy, audaciously.

"Pooh! You are merely a rascal in the making. I wouldn't hint how we govern your sex, if you were anything but a grub."

The boy laughed complacently. "I'm a very nice grub."

"Very precocious, at all events. You know much more than is good for you. Fanny, you should whip him."

"I haven't the heart or the muscle, my dear. The only safe thing will be to marry a strong man with a bad temper."

"I should jolly well like to see the stepfather who would pitch into me."

"You will, if you don't behave. Isn't that eyebrow a little crooked, Billy?" and she fingered it delicately.

"Don't think so; but you have a smudge of powder on your chin."

"So I have. How horrid! There!" dusting it off. "What a comfort you are to your darling mammy, my own! Kiss me."

Billy brushed her rouge with careful lips, and after a glance to see that he had not blurred the picture, Lady Richardson put away the mirror.

"Thank goodness, we're moving again," she prattled. "I do hope Reggy won't be in a bad temper."

"I'll square that, little mother. Been to the theatres lately, Lady Jim?"

"No," answered Leah, amused by his man-about-town air. "Is there anything good on?"

"Awful stuff," announced Billy, with the conviction, of mature judgment. "Couldn't sit out more than two plays. *The Woman with Three Husbands* isn't bad, though. Very French, of course. Saw it four times before I told the little mother she couldn't face it."

"How alluring! Will you take me?"

Billy was obviously shocked. "No woman should see that piece. I can stand heaps, but----" an after-me-the-deluge shrug hinted at the degradation of the drama.

"Yes, poor darling," chimed in his mother; "he was blushing three inches deep all over when he came home."

"I am glad to hear that Billy can blush at all," murmured Lady Jim. "How's the betting, William?"

"Tolerable! I pulled off a fiver on Fly-by-Night; but a man in my form lost a tenner, silly juggins."

"Oh! How old is that man?"

"Sixteen, and thinks he's twenty. Awfully saucy chap though. Went nap on a girl, and another fella' scooped th' pool."

"Don't they teach English at Eton, Billy?"

The youth was quite undisturbed. "Try to," he assured her; "but there's no snap about the classical rot they give us. Oh, here we are."

"And there is Reggy," cried Lady Richardson, craning her dyed head out of the window like another Jezebel. "How d'y do, Captain Lake? Lovely day! So sorry we're late. You know Lady James Kaimes?"

"I have that pleasure," said the tall young soldier, saluting. "Very sorry to hear your husband is ill, Lady James."

"Thanks! But I daresay Jamaica will pull him round, Captain Lake."

"Hope it won't," breathed Billy, at her elbow, as the lift soared.

"Why, you horrid little boy?"

"There'll be a chance for me."

"No, no! You're too much of a general lover, Billy."

"Girls do run a man so hard, nowadays," observed Billy, pathetically.

"It was different in your youth, no doubt. But I am not a girl, and quite old enough to box the ears of conceited urchins."

"Do!--if you'll let me give you a kiss for a blow."

"What precocious Christianity! You had better apply to that pretty American girl near the Casino door."

"Miss Mamie Mulrady? Oh, I can get her kisses without fightin'. Not bad-lookin', is she? Lots of tin, an' as spry as they make 'em. There's th' little mother an' that rotter chippin' into th' Casino. Shall we follow, Lady Jim?"

They were stopped on the steps by Miss Mulrady, "who knew both, and claimed acquaintance through a wholly unnecessary lorgnette. She was a vivacious Wild West product, who exaggerated the vernacular, because Europeans expected to find the Californian girl of fiction in real life. Her exaggerated slang was assumed out of sheer amusement, and she greatly enjoyed the amazed looks of those who heard her talk good Anglo-Saxon, which she did, when she escaped from fools to forgather with wise men.

"How are you, Miss Mulrady?" asked Billy solemnly.

"Keepin' afloat, I guess, but that's about all. The dollars I've lost buckin' the tiger would have bought me a dozen husbands."

"Foreign ones are cheap, I believe," said Leah, admiring the prairie-flower's Paris frock more than her republican manner.

"You make me smile. I'm goin' to run tandem with Sir Billy here--me first and he the wheeler."

"No go," said the boy, quite able to hold his own. "I'm not goin' to marry a Bret Harte girl."

"Oh, do," replied Miss Mulrady, in the purest of English, and placing two small gloved hands together. "I'll be a wife and a mother in one."

"What economy!" smiled Lady Jim. "Are you coming into the 'devil's parlour'?"

"Later. I'm waiting for Mr. Askew."

Leah started. She thought that Askew was safe in Shropshire, making attempts to civilise the fixture. "Harry Askew?"

"That's so," assented Miss Mulrady, relapsing into her Wild West vocabulary, and with a keen look. "He called on Mommo an' me, when he was cruisin' out 'Frisco way. We're negotiatin' a system to break this old bank."

"You evidently wish to be popularised in a song," said Lady Jim, languidly. "How long has Mr. Askew been devoting his energies to such things?" This with an angry reflection that he had not called on her.

"You might reckon it twenty-four hours," said the American, admiring her pointed brown shoe. "He's here for his health."

"I've heard that excuse before, with regard to Monte Carlo."

"Shouldn't wonder. We ticket our sins best sugar. Sir Billy, come along an' buy me candy at the stores."

"But your man, Miss Mulrady--the Askew chap?"

"Lady Jim an' I 'ull swap humans. What say?" and she looked at Leah, mischievously overdoing the slang.

"I never swap what isn't my own property," answered Lady Jim, considering this offer too Western, and resenting the familiarity to the extent of walking into the Casino with her head very much in the air. America could hold her own with the mother-country, and Leah did not approve.

"She wants to be the whole show an' the box-office," murmured Mamie, mischievously. "Stay here, Bub."

"I am sorry to refuse a lady," replied Billy, resenting the word; "but I've put my money on Lady Jim, this trip."

"On the red--hair, you mean. Go bye-bye with your nurse, then. Here's Mr. Askew, he's older than you."

"And easier to please," snapped the youth, much offended. "You'll excuse me, Miss Mulrady, but a man can't keep a woman waitin'."

He retired into what Lady Jim called the "devil's parlour" with a Floreat Etona air, and Miss Mulrady, after a glance at the ears which she longed to box soundly, turned to receive a breathless apology from the belated Askew.

"There's a friend of yours gone in to sin for an hour," said she, when a treaty was concluded.

"I have so many friends--so-called."

"Of the high-toned gilt-edged sort, with red scalps?"

Askew comprehended in a second. "Lady Jim," he stammered; "yes, I heard that she was at San Remo. What's she doing here?"

"Visitin' the sick an' the poor," said Mamie, shrewdly. "It's what folks come to Monte for. Guess, she best drop in on you--a sicker man I never saw, an' you'll be poor enough by th' time we're through with this old system of yours. I know a bank where th' wild time goes. You may look all through Bacon without findin' that remark--it's my own. Let's get."

Thus, with barbaric japes, did the child of nature lead her companion into the gilded halls of iniquity, and the two jostled the well-dressed crowd which circulated round the tables. The silence was that of an arctic night, save for the

droning voices of the croupiers, and at times a hurried whisper of joy or dismay.

"Goin' in for rouge et noir with Lady Jim?" asked Miss Mulrady, alluding to the hair of Askew and his friend; "or perhaps she's sportin' on trente et quarante, to suit her years."

"She's under thirty," growled Askew, crossly.

"An' you're under the weather, considerable," retorted the American, sharply. "Get up steam an' fizzle a bit, can't you?"

"Shall I war-whoop, or dance a horn-pipe?"

"Neither I prefer originality."

"Try the system, then;" and Askew pushed his way through the Mammon-worshippers to where the roulette ball wheeled its fatal round.

Lady Jim did not play. She had stupidly forgotten her peacock's feather and could not risk loss with her small capital. But Billy, having the audacity and luck of innocence, was at hand, so she gave him five hundred francs to experiment.

"We'll halve the winnings."

"Never take money from a woman," said Billy, gravely; "but I don't mind a fly. Got any sportin' number?"

"Thirteen, because that's your age. There is Mademoiselle Aksakoff, I wish to speak to her;" and she moved gracefully towards the tall, pale girl, while Young Iniquity, with the air of a Vanderbilt, planked her money on the odd number.

Katinka Aksakoff grew crimson when Lady Jim saluted her, and would have evaded the meeting if possible. She might have been a nun from the looks of her, and was garbed in unrelieved black, which Leah concluded was mourning for unrequited affection. After that fleeting wave of colour, her thin, oval face grew marble white, and a pair of dark questioning eyes appeared twice as large and three times as brilliant as they had been before resting on Lady Jim's gracious smile.

"So glad to meet you," murmured Leah, as they shook hands in the air. "Lady Richardson and I have come to tea. Where is your father?"

"He is talking with the German ambassador," replied Katinka, without a smile, and with Siberian coldness.

"So fortunate. We can chat without interruption."

"I scarcely think we have much to chat about."

"Oh yes," rejoined Lady Jim, with perfect good-humour. "When you learn how you misjudge me, we shall get on capitally."

"Pardon. I do not understand."

"Probably not, since I have yet to make my explanation. Let us walk on the terrace, and you can throw me over, to where they shoot the pigeons, if my conversation displeases you."

"Ah, but it is so strange!"

"And so necessary--to your peace of mind."

"No!" Mademoiselle Aksakoff's face grew scarlet once more, and she pressed her hand to her heart, as though she felt there a cruel pain. Perhaps she did, poor soul! But the stoicism of the Slav enabled her to summon up a wry smile, and to bow her head, as she followed her brilliant rival. With the excess of an ill-governed, passionate heart did she hate this woman; but as a Niobe, frozen and cold, did she appear when they were pacing the terrace. And not one single word of her companion's sugared speech was she prepared to believe.

Leah's eyes rested appreciatively on the varied beauty of God's work and man's improvements. The huddled white houses of Monaco crowned its giant rock, which bulked hugely against the blended azure of sea and sky. The placid waters ringed its base with foam, and stretched with sparks and dashes of fire towards an immeasurable horizon. Landward bunched the red roofs of the town, below arid and precipitous heights, soaring massively into the radiant and ever-deepening blue. A balmy wind, like some invisible alchemist, changed the sombre green of the olive-groves to patches of glittering silver. Near at hand spread the lustrous foliage of lemon- and orange-trees, nor was wanting the

almond-blossom of the far east. They walked under palms suggestive of Bedouin life, and, to the well-read, of Heine's sad little song, immortal and heart-rendingly true. Roses and violets, and flowers of many shapes and hues, bordered the terrace; the wide sea laughed at their feet, and behind them rose the palatial structure of the Casino, gorgeous as the Golden House of Nero. It was Fairyland, and Lady Jim said so to her sad companion, who was too blinded by love to see beauty anywhere when the beloved was absent.

"We can talk in French, if you like," said Leah, after she had paid her tribute to nature.

"In English, I think," replied the Russian girl; "my father wishes me to speak only your tongue, while we remain in London, so that I may improve."

"You can't," answered Leah, genuinely complimentary. "Your accent is much better than a born English person; also your grammar, and your choice of words."

"We take the trouble to learn your language, whereas you English do not."

"We're too busy annexing the world to bother about philological lessons," said Lady Jim, remembering Heine's remark anent the Romans.

"Possibly," assented Katinka, with a chilling smile; "but, interesting as this conversation is, I do not see its necessity."

"Monsieur Demetrius," began Leah, abruptly, when Mademoiselle raised a protesting hand.

"We need not speak of him, madame."

"Why not? He is a mutual friend. I know you fancy----"

"I fancy nothing," interrupted the other, haughtily. "Words are not needed where he is concerned."

"But explanations are. You think that I love Demetrius!"

Katinka flushed painfully, and she put her hand suddenly to her throat.

"I forbid you to speak," she said, in a stifled voice.

"Nonsense. We are not in Russia, where people kneel down and say please. Besides, it is necessary for your peace of mind that you should hear what I have to say."

"You made that remark before, Lady James."

"True, and I make it again, to emphasise my meaning, though I hate repetition. Demetrius loves you."

"No, no! It is you who----"

"Pish! His heart is yours; his science mine."

"His science!" Mademoiselle Aksakoff looked surprised.

"What else do you think attracted me? I am an English cat, and I have no lovers. Do you remember La Fontaine's fable?"

"Lady James, be plain with me."

"I am trying to be. You think that I love Demetrius, and that he is devoted to me. It is not so."

Katinka winced. She did not like such plain speaking, and, moreover, doubted its truth. "If I could think so, I would----"

"Of course you can think so," said Lady Jim, amiably. "Demetrius is particularly clever in curing consumptive diseases. For that reason I conversed with him a great deal. My husband is very ill, and I wanted the doctor to cure him. If Demetrius thought that my liking for his society meant anything else, he is an egotist. My advice is, that you should procure his pardon and marry him."

"There are obstacles in the way."

"I am not one, I assure you."

"Are you speaking honestly?"

"I am!" and the eyes of the two women met. Katinka searched the hard blue orbs of the great lady with painful intensity, and Leah bore the scrutiny with the knowledge that her conduct had been, and always would be, perfectly correct. Had she been the least in love with the doctor, she would not have dared to submit to that probing, painful gaze. Women may deceive mere men; they cannot deceive one another, especially in affairs of the heart. When Katinka withdrew her eyes she was satisfied that Lady Jim cared nothing for Demetrius. Without explanation, she burst into rapid and wrathful speech, and Leah's feminine perspicacity enabled her to guess the unuttered preamble, which a man would have required to be put into words.

"Why then do you lure him to your feet?" cried the Russian girl, in a sharp, pained voice. "If you love him not, why torture him, and me? I know he loves you--I know--I know--oh yes, I know."

"You do not. His love for me--if it can be called so--is the mere passing fancy of a man for a woman who has been kind to him."

"Too kind," muttered Katinka, vengefully.

"Not at all. But men are so conceited that they think a woman's smile means a woman's love. You have a golden heart, yet you throw it into the greedy hands of this selfish egotist----"

"He is not that," gasped the girl.

"Yes, he is, and much worse. Demetrius possesses the selfishness of a woman and the vanity of a man."

"You reverse the proper order."

"No, I don't. Men are far vainer than women, and women more selfish than men. I'm selfish myself, therefore I am happy. You are one of those self-tormenting, self-denying angels, who make men what they are--vain, greedy, conceited, lord-of-creation beasts. And I insult the beasts by such a comparison."

"I thought you liked men."

"I use them, and I detest them," retorted Lady Jim, speaking more plainly than was her custom. "There are good men--I don't deny that, for I know one at

least"--she was thinking of Lionel; "but the majority--ugh! God help the women like yourself, who give their hearts into the keeping of such animals!"

"You love your husband, surely."

"We all love our husbands--it's part of the Church Service to love them. Pah!--I am not here to talk of my marriage, but of yours. You know now that I don't care for Demetrius, and that I desired his help merely for my husband's sake."

"Yes. I have wronged you;" and Katinka put out her hand.

Lady Jim took it, rather softened. "You poor child, how foolish you are! Why not forget Demetrius?"

"I cannot."

"He is not worthy of you."

"Is he not?--ah, you don't know him."

Leah smiled grimly. "I know him much better than you do. However, if you insist upon putting him on an imaginary pedestal, there is no more to be said. Have you heard from him lately?"

Mademoiselle Aksakoff was now quite deceived, and looked upon Lady Jim as her dearest and best friend. "Last week I received a letter from Funchal," she said eagerly. "Yes; I wrote to him about the chances of his pardon----"

"Are there any chances?"

"Yes, yes; I assure you--yes. I have a cousin, high in favour with the Czar, who can procure an immediate pardon. But my father does not wish me to marry Demetrius----"

"Wise man," murmured Leah.

"And so there is some difficulty. Oh"--she clasped her hands--"if Constantine would only be guided by me! He comes of a rich family, and has the title of Prince----"

"So he told me."

"Ah, but did he say how he had parted from his family because of his advanced ideas? He gave up money and rank, and all that makes life pleasant, to labour among the poor peasants. Is that not noble?"

"So noble that I have difficulty in thinking M. Demetrius acted so."

"But he did--he did. And my father is angered because of this self-sacrifice. If Constantine would only return to the rank of life in which he was born, my father would permit me to marry him, and then the pardon would speedily be procured. But I plead in vain," she murmured, with hanging head "he will not listen."

"He may, when he returns," volunteered Lady Jim, kindly.

"But when will that be? If he goes to Jamaica----"

Leah turned suddenly white. "Why to Jamaica?" she asked sharply.

"He wrote that the Duke of Pentland had asked him to go there, to see after your husband. And you say that----"

"Yes, yes; but this patient Garth, who----"

Katinka looked surprised. "But have you not heard?"

"Heard? I have heard nothing. I do not correspond with M. Demetrius, my dear. It is now April, and he has been at Funchal since January, trying to heal that poor man. Has he----?"

"No," said Mademoiselle Aksakoff, quickly. "The man is dead."

"Garth dead?" Lady Jim sat down, with a gasp.

"Yes; so Demetrius wrote last week, and said he would go on to Jamaica at the Duke's request to see your husband. But you look quite ill."

"I hate to hear of deaths," said Lady Jim, viciously. She certainly spoke truly with regard to this particular death. In her mind lurked a dread lest Demetrius

had assisted nature, after all.

CHAPTER XV

Monsieur Aksakoff owned a toy villa, pleasantly placed amongst orange-groves and lemon-gardens, on the outskirts of Fools' Paradise. Hither, somewhere about the hour of five, trooped a gay party, of which Katinka was not the least merry. So unaccountable were her spirits, that the majority judged her to be what the Scotch aptly call "fey." Lady Jim, in the minority, knew better. A recollection of the recent interview explained the girl's dancing on a possible grave.

Leah had subjugated one of her own suspicious sex. This is a rare miracle; rarer still, it had been achieved by truth-telling. Certainly, with inevitable female reservation, Lady Jim had not told the whole truth and nothing but the truth; but then, her knowledge did not include the shibboleth of oath-taking. She did not love Demetrius--no avowal could have been more honest. Still, his medical acquirements had scarcely induced the flirtation which Katinka resented, and in saying so she swerved from the path of rectitude. Nevertheless, that ingenuous explanation of the illegal apron-string deceived Mademoiselle Aksakoff into believing that Truth had really been dragged, unclothed and impeccable, from her well.

The result may be guessed. From cold hostility, Katinka, ignorant of the golden mean, melted into warm friendship: the sadness of unrequited love was replaced by the allurements of hope, and the hitherto dreary unpeopled world became an Arcadia of magical beauty, through which there ever moved a possible bridegroom. The colour returned to her wan cheeks, the light to her dark eyes, and in place of a listless nun the astonished father beheld a dancing, laughing nymph. Clever as Aksakoff was, he failed to understand the why and the wherefore of this transformation. Being a diplomatist, he searched for the

magician who had accomplished its wonders; being mere man, he naturally espied the obvious. The unexpected presence of Demetrius, as he concluded, was responsible for the breathing of life into this statue.

Lady Jim guessed his explanation, and was amused by his inquiring looks. She promised herself the pleasure of making things clear, in such a way as would compel confidences on his part. These might be useful in averting the wrath of Demetrius, when he came to know that his reward was withheld. And Leah was not unreasonable in anticipating trouble of the worst, seeing that the doctor had already loaded her with a portion of a debt which she did not intend to pay. Garth was dead. That part of the task had been accomplished. Now, Katinka informed her that Demetrius was bound for Jamaica. There he would arrange for the obliteration of Jim, and return with a substituted corpse to console the afflicted widow. The widow herself shivered at the prospect of being honest and tangibly grateful; and, since the possible was rapidly becoming the probable, began to consider means of evasion. But it was no easy matter to nullify the bond of a semi-oriental Shylock.

With a diplomatist, superadded to a father, for an ally, and with tricky Muscovite politics to play with, Lady Jim fancied that her end might be obtained. But, although she knew the goal, she could not see the most direct and least dangerous way to gain it. Her path was perplexing and perilous, so it was necessary to find a finger-post. She thought that Aksakoff might stand for such, since he would do much to neutralise the chance of his daughter's marriage with Demetrius. But to enlist him on her side, and in her schemes, required a private conference, and plainer speaking than Lady Jim approved of. However, as there was no opportunity of private speech for at least one hour, she had time to construct feasible plans.

Meanwhile, her silence over the teacups was remarkable in so lively a lady. Certainly, Garth might have died in the orthodox manner, as ample time had been given for his exit. On the other hand, Demetrius, eager for his reward, might have--but no; she could not bear to think of such a horror, and employed her will to deny the possibility. Nevertheless, strive as she would to banish the thought, it returned again and again, insistent and terrifying. No wonder Askew was moved to ask if she felt unwell, and no wonder she protested, with unnecessary emphasis, that she never felt better in her life.

"I am gathering instruction from the conversation of others," she assured him, when he urged smelling-salts.

"But you are so extraordinarily pale."

"I have parted with my colour to Mademoiselle Aksakoff. See, she blooms like an artificial rose."

"Why artificial? Her bloom is natural."

"And her spirits are forced. A hothouse is Nature's corset."

"I don't know what you mean," said Askew, bluntly; "you are a puzzle."

"Which is as much as to say that I am a woman. I wish you would cease personalities and refill my glass."

This sounded more bacchanalian than it was, for the glass contained nothing more destructive to the nerves than straw-coloured tea, prepared, milkless, in the Russian manner, with plenty of sugar and a squeeze of lemon. Katinka presided over a samovar, and dispensed caviare sandwiches, so that the meal was entirely Muscovite. Aksakoff, stiff and pale and lean, precisely dressed and watchful as a cat, paid diplomatic compliments to Lady Richardson, while Captain Lake laughed with Katinka. Miss Mulrady had annexed a flattering vicomte who wanted money in exchange for a name which dated from the Crusades, and Askew hovered, like the silly moth he was, round Lady Jim's superfine wax candle. This possible tragedy of singed wings doubly and trebly assured Katinka of Leah's honesty, for who could love the demi-god Demetrius and trifle with a nautical butterfly? Thus did she argue, crediting her once rival and now ally with the infatuation which, in Fairyland, made Titania clip Bottom in her arms.

"The air of this place suits you," said Lake, wondering at this bubbling gaiety; "you were pale and sad when we last met, Mademoiselle."

"I may be the same when we meet again," she replied, refilling Lady Jim's glass. "What would you? Moods are agreeable."

"Hum! I don't choose April as the most enjoyable month of the year."

Katinka laughed meaningly, and glanced slyly at Lady Richardson. "I see; you prefer an autumn month--highly coloured and mature."

This was too symbolic for Lake, but some intuition of its meaning caused him to flush to the roots of his fair hair, and verbally deny comprehension. "I do not understand."

"No gallant man would," she retorted, and, further enlightened, the captain's pink became a violent crimson, to the concern of its cause.

"How red you are, Reggy!" cried Lady Richardson. "I hope it isn't scarlet fever."

"I guess you suffer from that," murmured Mamie, posing her lorgnette.

"Plaît-il?" inquired the bewildered vicomte; but received no reply. Miss Mulrady's knowledge of French was too limited to permit of pathological discussions.

"Russian tea," explained Lake, cooling to his ordinary sun-burn.

"Why not one word--indigestion?"

"Indigestion," repeated the soldier, with dry obedience.

"You should really try Billy's new medicine; it has made him very fit. By the way, where is my darling?"

Lake dodged the quizzical glance of Miss Mulrady, and explained that Sir Billy had been last seen wrinkling his young brows over the intricacies of trente et quarante. "Couldn't haul him off; but I daresay hunger will fetch him to the tea-table."

"Such devotion argues good luck," said Leah, wondering if Billy would arrive with full pockets.

"Perhaps, Lady James. Most boys are lucky at play."

"And therefore unlucky in love?" inquired Katinka, smiling.

"Children should know nothing of such things," said Aksakoff, stiffly.

"I guess not," cried Mamie; "but Sir Billy is a freak."

"Really, Miss Mulrady," frowned the indignant little mother, "my son is not so eligible for Barnum's Show as you seem to imagine. He hasn't got two heads, or an elastic skin, or any of those things which seem to be so popular in the United States."

"Wouldn't make him more interestin' if he had. He's a moral freak."

"Et moi aussi?" asked the vicomte, whose scant knowledge of Americanese prevented entire understanding.

"Oh, you haven't got morals of any sort."

"M. de Marville is the more interesting on that account," said Leah, rousing herself from a two minutes' silence; "a really good young man should be sealed, as a bore, in a glass case."

"Then why is Mr. Askew at large?"

The sailor laughed. "I fear my past can best answer that question."

"By your tongue? Well?"

"Better leave that well alone," laughed Katinka, gaily. "Besides, only women have pasts."

"And presents, when the men are generous," said Lady Jim.

"I guess men are always generous, when there's anythin' to be got."

"After meals, there is nothing to be got, save smoking," said the hostess; "you gentlemen have leave. Captain Lake, will you give me a cigarette?"

Like many Russian ladies, Mademoiselle Aksakoff adored those fatal rolls of tobacco wrapped in coffee-coloured paper, and consumed a great quantity. Lady Richardson, unlike the average Englishwoman, smoked likewise--that is, she fiddled qualmishly with half a cigarette, because it looked smart to do what you shouldn't. The gentlemen also offered incense to the very modern goddess Nicotine, and shortly Lady Jim was the only person present not committed to

this agreeable vice.

"I am behind the times," she confessed; "but please don't look upon me as a prude on the prowl. I willingly permit other women to spoil their teeth and ruin their digestions."

"What a nasty speech!" cried Lady Richardson, offended, especially as Leah knew it was an effort for her to sin in this way.

"My dear, it is; but then, I feel nasty."

"And look charming," whispered Askew.

"I wonder how many times a day you repeat yourself," she replied impatiently.

"As often as I recall your face. I can think then of only one adjective, charming, and one noun, angel."

"What limitations! And the necessary verb?"

"I love you."

"First person singular, as usual, after the manner of the male egotist. Isn't this rather Lindley-Murray whispering?"

If it was, they had no opportunity of continuing it, for Lady Richardson drew Leah's attention to the fact that she had lost a fortune in the Casino. "I depend upon you, dear, for my return fare."

"Billy will pay," conjectured Lady Jim, calmly: "I quite expect he has broken the bank."

"Not on Mr. Askew's system," cried Mamie; "you couldn't run an apple-stall on his lines."

"You would suggest improvements," complained Askew, reproachfully.

"Then you admit that they were."

"If fitted properly into the puzzle, and at the proper time. But it's a mistake to swap horses when crossing a stream."

"Huh!" said Miss Mulrady, in her best Californian style. "I guess the animals belonged to you. I lost no dollars;" and with a comfortable sense of her own 'cuteness, she accepted a cigarette from the attentive vicomte.

This frothy chatter irritated a lady who was inwardly grappling with problems of the near future. Askew ventured on more spindrift, only to be snubbed into seeking the complaisant society of Mamie. This necessitated a game of general post, for Katinka slipped in rapid French and boulevard gossip with de Marville, while Lady Richardson drew Lake once more to her elderly feet. Remained the diplomatist, in splendid isolation, and his gaze wandered to Lady Jim, who stared straight before her. She was looking into the next world, where a reproachful ghost, something resembling Jim, was asking why he had been butchered to make a woman's holiday. And the living, half believing the terrible truth implied, gave shuffling answer to the dead: "Demetrius is to blame----"

So vivid was the vision, so powerful the thought, so guilty the conscience, that her tongue actually framed this much aloud, before she became aware that her secret was slipping out. A hasty glance around assured her that none of the prattlers had overheard; but an echo of the name at her elbow testified to Monsieur Aksakoff's excellent hearing. Lady Jim grew chill. What had she said? How much had he gathered? Instinctively facing a possible danger, she did not even turn her head or raise her voice, but, almost in the same breath, concluded the sentence differently: "----if he does not cure Jim."

"Your husband?" asked the diplomatist, politely.

With admirable skill Leah started, as though her reflections had been unexpectedly interrupted. "You there, M. Aksakoff? I was thinking of my husband--yes. He is trying to get well in Jamaica, and M. Demetrius has gone to pull him round. I shall certainly blame him if he does not cure Jim."

"That is severe, madame. After all, no human being holds the keys of life and death."

Self-controlled as she was, Lady Jim shuddered. Demetrius certainly held the key of death, and had used it--for so she began to believe--in opening for Garth a door into the unknown. However, she utilised the shudder very dexterously. "Don't talk like that. It makes me fear lest Jim should never get well. But after all, M. Demetrius is extraordinarily clever. I told your daughter, only this

afternoon, how I had been attracted to him for Jim's sake, and by his knowledge of consumption."

"Oh!" Aksakoff looked at her with his pale eyes, and very inquiringly. It had not occurred to him that the lady was a model wife. "The medical attainments of M. Demetrius attracted you."

"Naturally! My husband is ill. I wish him to be cured. M. Demetrius has a European reputation for cure of consumption. We have held many conversations on the subject, and I feel certain that there is a chance for poor dear Jim."

"If M. Demetrius becomes his medical attendant?"

"He is," Leah assured him. "The poor creature he was looking after in Madeira, on behalf of the Duke, is dead, and Katinka informed me that M. Demetrius had sailed for Jamaica."

Aksakoff frowned. "How does my daughter know that?"

Lady Jim rose to shrug her shoulders, and to seize the opportunity thus offered to solve her problem by means of a private conversation.

"A charming place you have here," she said, glancing round, and giving him to understand that the shrug was his answer; "the air is so balmy."

"You will find it more so without tobacco smoke," said the Russian, throwing away his cigarette, and, without knowing it, was thus skilfully entrapped into a duologue by an ostensibly reluctant woman.

"I am so comfortable here," urged Leah, with feigned hesitation.

"So pleased, madame; but your sense of the picturesque will make you sacrifice ease for a particularly charming view of the Estrelles."

"The proper study of womankind is man," misquoted Lady Jim, accepting the invitation; "but nature comes as a relief at times. We see so little of her in society," and she glanced at Lady Richardson's dyed hair and tinted cheeks.

"You are severe, madame."

"I shall begin to believe so, if you repeat that a third time," she replied, smiling, and glancing sideways at his face. This she did to discover, if possible, his intentions. It suddenly occurred to her, that the diplomatist's insistence meant intrigue on his part. He, like herself, was playing a game, and Lady Jim, for the sake of the result, wished to overlook his hand. Had she seen it, which she did not, the knowledge that people knew more about her domestic affairs than she would have approved of might have shocked her.

Ivan Aksakoff was not a tricky Russian, nor a diplomatist of repute, for nothing. Instructions had reached him several times from headquarters that Demetrius was to be watched while in England, and, if possible, decoyed into the territory of a less scrupulous nation, for the purpose of arrest. A drugged official's feelings had been outraged, a much-wanted Anarchist had escaped through the connivance of the exile, and a paternal government thought that an enforced trip to Siberia might cool misplaced friendships for suspected persons. Several times Aksakoff had tried to induce the Demetrius opossum to climb down from his tree of refuge, but the suspicious beast refused to oblige him. Therefore, all that the diplomatist could do was to keep himself advised of the doctor's doings, in the hope of luring him to destruction when he was off his guard. He had biblical precedent for this hope. Shimei, the son of Gera, lulled by long security, had crossed the forbidden brook Kidron, so why should not Demetrius, likewise forgetful, cross the Channel?

Stealthy inquiry into the doctor's affairs had led Aksakoff to ask himself, why the man dangled at Lady Jim's apron-strings. Reports poured in, fast and thick, that the Curzon Street household was insolvent, but these did not help the diplomatist overmuch. If Lady Jim wanted money, she would scarcely ask a penniless exile for the cash he did not possess. The man was not sufficiently handsome, nor so superlatively fascinating, that he should gain the love of the most beautiful woman in London. And, incidentally, Aksakoff learned that Lady Jim was a modern Lucrece, although she did not profess an ardent love for her lord and master. Therefore, as neither Mammon nor Cupid could explain a friendship which was pretty freely discussed in clubs and drawing-rooms, Aksakoff could not comprehend this particular wile of woman.

In his endeavour to fathom the meaning, he even went so far as to question his daughter, knowing that she was as infatuated with Demetrius as Demetrius was with Lady Kaimes. But Katinka either could not or would not explain, and for months the diplomatist had been exasperated by the sight of a genuinely platonic

friendship, for which there seemed to be no reason. Now he learned from one of the parties to the bond that a husband's sickness, and a friend's skill, were the elements which composed the intimacy. Such a case, in such a light, had never before been presented to him, and while sauntering by Lady Jim's side to view the Estrelles against the sunset, he was trying to think if the explanation was genuine. To his acute hearing, it did not sound even plausible.

Nevertheless--and this was Aksakoff's reason for seeking the interview--some use might be made of the woman to entrap the man. Lady Jim was badly in need of ready money, and the Russian Government had, at the time, full coffers. Since there was no love in the question, this singular lady might, for a round sum, dispense with the doctor's attendance on her husband. More--if delicately handled, she might induce Demetrius to show her the sights of Paris. It was difficult to hint this without shocking the feelings of a great lady and a spotless woman. Still, if skilfully done, and without too much emphasis, Lady Jim might gather that her finances could be put in order without much trouble on her part.

But Aksakoff had another argument which induced him to risk a scene with outraged virtue. He loved his daughter, and wished her to marry a highly placed cousin, who would be of political use to his father-in-law. Unfortunately, Katinka was infatuated--Aksakoff could find no more appropriate word--with Demetrius. Marriage with a person wanted by the powerful of St. Petersburg meant a check to the diplomatist and a handle to his many enemies. The match was not to be thought of. Yet, if Demetrius would only prove kind, Mademoiselle Aksakoff would assuredly become his wife, even if she had to achieve the marriage by elopement. Also, Katinka might be able to procure the man's pardon, and of this Aksakoff entirely disapproved. Even if the doctor was whitewashed, he had such socialistic or anarchistic feelings--it mattered not which--that he would never consent to resume his title or the large income attached to such resumption. On the whole, both from a fatherly and a domestic point of view, Aksakoff felt that this marplot would be safer in a Siberian mine. How to get him there was the problem.

The solution might come through Lady Jim. If he could only ascertain her feelings towards Demetrius, and hint that such a lovely woman should not be worried by sordid money affairs, it was not improbable that such a satisfactory result would be arrived at. It was a forlorn hope, but Aksakoff dared it; it was a straw, but he grasped at it--and now, fully committed to the speculation, he was casting about in his mind as to a promising beginning. No easy task, for

Aksakoff's spies and Aksakoff's experience assured him that Lady James Kaimes was a prickly plant, needing care in the handling.

So it will be seen that Leah's intuition had not deceived her, scanty as was the ground for suspicion. The closer she examined his face by swift side-glances, the more certain she became that he was playing a game, and--from her experience of diplomatists--by no means for love. To vary the metaphor, she and the Russian were about to engage in a duel, either with foils or swords. Lady Jim did not care which. She was perfectly assured that, however dexterous her antagonist might be, she could fence quite as well, if not better. And thus she marched to the duelling ground, already a victor.

CHAPTER XVI

Silhouetted against a pale purple sky, the dark masses of the Estrelles floated on a shimmering sea. Nearer and clearer, yet less sharply defined, etherealised by amethystine hues, and indistinct through the haze of gloaming, frowned the Grimaldi stronghold, its mouldering walls, clasping closely packed houses, dominated by a lean and soaring campanile. Over the cactus hedge, and between bending palms, could be caught a glimpse of the trim, unromantic modern town, of the sleepy waters of the bay, and fishing-boats rocking beside spick-and-span toy yachts, with here and there the picturesque felucca of Mediterranean commerce, old-fashioned, with oars and lateen sails. Only Shelley in radiant verse could have described with any approach to truth this magical dreamland, real yet unreal, under the changing colours of sunset.

As at the outset of an earlier and less difficult interview, Lady Jim admired the loveliness of paradise, with ostentatious disregard of her embarrassed companion. And embarrassed he was, to such a degree that she marvelled at his choice of a profession in which emotions count as crimes. This judgment was

unfair, for Aksakoff ordinarily commanded his feelings with the severity of a martinet. But so great were the stakes for which he proposed to play--his daughter's future and his political advancement--that he shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, clasped and unclasped his hands, and betrayed more of the natural man and anxious father than was consistent with diplomatic reticence.

Having some idea of this mental confusion, Leah waited for him to make an almost certain mistake, of which she intended to take full advantage. She was like a cat watching a mouse-hole, ready to pounce at an opportune moment. Meanwhile, she held her tongue, which sufficiently assured Aksakoff of her dangerous capability. He had never before beheld the ominous miracle of a silent woman, and his nerves were none the better for this surprising spectacle.

"Demetrius, madame," he finally blundered, and recognised the blunder as the words left his mouth--"Demetrius is your friend."

The attack was so weak that Lady Jim contemptuously gave him vantage-ground. "Katinka's lover also, I understand."

"And the Czar's enemy," retorted Aksakoff angrily. "Let us have all his qualifications at once, madame."

"By all means. Enemy, friend, lover. Well?"

"It is very far from well, as you know, madame. I desire no Siberian felon for my son-in-law."

"I never knew that M. Demetrius had been to Siberia."

"He will go there yet--to his grave."

"What an odd choice of a cemetery!" said Leah, shrugging; "but I assure you, M. Aksakoff, that I take no interest in these funeral arrangements."

"No! Yet report says----"

He was about to blurt out something still more undiplomatic, but that Lady Jim's pity for his ineptitude made her intervene. "I know what it says, and of course I deeply sympathise with you."

"Madame!"

"Yes, yes; I comprehend your feelings. It is hard that your own daughter should defy you, especially as M. Demetrius is merely a doctor."

"He is a prince in our country," said Aksakoff, furious that she should take the lead, and at a loss how to regain it.

"A felon also, I understood you to say."

"Let him venture on French soil, and I shall certainly make him one," snarled Aksakoff, with unpleasantly glittering eyes. Lady Jim had scratched him rather dexterously, and the Tartar stood revealed.

She scratched again. "Even if Katinka makes him your son-in-law?"

"That shall never be!" He hesitated, then attempted a bear-hug. "I will speak plainly, madame----"

"About Katinka and her infatuation? Oh, certainly."

Aksakoff bit his lip. Used as he was to verbal fencing, Leah's handling of her tongue baffled him. He took refuge in truth-telling.

"Demetrius does not love my daughter," he said bluntly.

"How fortunate for you, and disagreeable for her!"

"He loves an--an--an actress," explained Aksakoff, wondering if her interest in the man deepened to jealousy.

Apparently it did not. "That would interest Katinka more than it does me," she assured him; then, affecting the innocence of ignorance, "May I ask why you chronicle small beer?"

"Demetrius is your intimate friend."

"My husband's medical attendant," she corrected quietly.

"If you remove him to that distance, I confess to an indiscretion. Shall we return?"

"Without admiring the Estrelles?"

"Madame, the excuse was obvious."

"For what?"

Aksakoff shrugged his shoulders. "For the clearing up of misunderstandings. You are anxious--so you say--that Demetrius should cure your husband. My reason for this conversation is, to apologise for my intention to rob you of his very valuable services. If I can trap Demetrius--say in Paris--Lord James must content himself with an inferior doctor."

Leah looked pensive and puzzled. "I comprehend; but why should you make use of the wrong word?"

"Misunderstanding?" Then, when she nodded, "My ignorance of your language--"

"Or of my feelings? By this talk of Parisian traps and Siberian punishment, you assume that I am acquainted with the private affairs of M. Demetrius."

"It is possible that I have made that mistake," said Aksakoff, dryly.

"As a diplomatist you should never confess as much. It might be that I may take advantage of your--mistake, to inform M. Demetrius of his danger."

"I foresaw that possibility, madame. As a dutiful wife, you naturally wish to keep so clever a doctor in attendance on your husband."

"Of course; but a trip to Siberia would not improve Jim's health."

"There is no need for the mountain to go to Mahomet, madame."

"Pardon me if in this case I think otherwise."

Aksakoff shrugged again. "I admit the reason, seeing that this particular mountain is married."

"These parables are a trifle wearisome, M. Aksakoff. The air is chilly, and I wish to return to Lady Richardson. Would you mind telling me plainly, before we part, why you sought this interview?"

"Assuredly, madame. My daughter loves this man, who does not love her, and who, by reason of his crime and opinions, is not an eligible husband. You were with Katinka this afternoon, as you informed me, and she is now so cheerful that I suspect you must have delivered some message from Demetrius to so raise her spirits. Or it might be"--he looked squarely at her, as he added, "that Demetrius is in Monte Carlo."

"No; your daughter had a letter from him, in which he stated that he was leaving Madeira for Jamaica. Go on, please."

"Katinka had a letter?" said Aksakoff, with an unpleasant look. "That, no doubt, accounts for her spirits. Were you Cupid's messenger, madame?"

Lady Jim smothered a laugh. "No; though I admit that I should like to see her happy."

"She will never be happy with a man who does not love her. Demetrius will not come near me, and I cannot explain. Will you oblige me by taking a message?"

"Why should I?"

"For the sake of retaining him as Lord James's medical attendant."

Leah nodded. "As a wife, I will take your message. What is it?"

"Tell Demetrius that if he will give Katinka to understand that he will never marry her my gratitude will be stronger than my duty."

"In other words, you will not arrest him."

"So long as he remains in England."

"Where he can't be arrested," laughed Lady Jim. "Well, your message shall be duly delivered. And I may as well confess, since we are committed to plain speaking, that M. Demetrius informed me why he had to leave Russia."

"His confidence will render it easier for you to make a treaty between us, madame."

"Possibly. But you will understand that I assume the rôle of peacemaker solely on my husband's account."

"Madame," Aksakoff bent and raised her hand to kiss it; "as a wife you are far above rubies. Shall we return?"

Leah consented without moving. She had not yet solved her problem. "One moment. You will give me your word that M. Demetrius will not be lured to Paris?"

"I give you my word, if the treaty is made, and Katinka is disabused of her infatuation."

"Which forms part of the treaty," said Leah, lightly. "In the interests of Jim, I'll do my best; but should he go to Paris----"

"He will assuredly leave it for Siberia, which is much colder and not so amusing."

"Then I must advise him to be naturalised in England."

"It will be the act of a friend, madame. And also, you might advise him to beware of this actress."

"Oh, I can't intrude my advice into his strictly private affairs."

"If you wish your husband to be cured, it will be as well to do so," Aksakoff recommended. "Mademoiselle Ninette is not to be trusted."

"Ninette? I have seen her--a very charming artiste."

"But unscrupulous."

"Not so much so, I hope, as to betray the man she loves."

"A woman, madam, will do much for money."

"How well you know the sex, monsieur!" said Lady Jim, ironically.

"I have had some experience, madame."

"And have benefited so little that you cannot manage your daughter without my intervention."

"I confess it. Let me amend my statement by saying that I have had many experiences and little experience."

"That is a more correct way of putting it," said Leah, gravely; "for I assure you, M. Aksakoff, that if a woman loves a man, she certainly will not betray him for money."

"We join issue, madame. The Uranian Aphrodite is not the divinity in this case, and Aphrodite Pandemos can be bought."

"How classical and confusing! And the price?"

"Two thousand pounds," said Aksakoff, carelessly.

"You should reckon it in francs, seeing that Mademoiselle Ninette is French. Otherwise she will not understand."

"The jingle of gold is a universal language, madame."

"An agreeable one, at all events. I wish we had more opportunity of studying it. Well, M. Aksakoff, for Jim's sake, I shall see that M. Demetrius affords this harpy no opportunity of earning the money."

"And you will pardon my mentioning the harpy's name?"

"We are a man and woman of the world, M. Aksakoff: there is no need to call spades shovels. I thank you for considering my husband. To lose the skill of M. Demetrius might result in his death."

"I am happy to have been of service to you, madame, and of course, you can understand my paternal feelings."

"Assuredly; I shall do my best to make your daughter see reason. A woman can talk to a woman of such things, you know."

"When she is such a woman as you, madame," said Aksakoff, again bending over her hand; "and now----"

"Just one hour to catch the train," remarked Leah, with a glance at the tiny watch set in her bracelet.

In this way Leah solved her problem, and Aksakoff gained his point; yet, on the face of it, their conversation dealt entirely with the saving of Demetrius from a Siberian prison, and Katinka and Katinka's matrimonial salvation. But Lady Jim knew that, if she could lure the doctor to Paris, she would not longer need to fear a Sabine alliance; while the diplomatist was satisfied that, for two thousand pounds, Demetrius would be safely transported to Siberia. Leah, guessing this,

let him think that the money tempted her, though she wondered how he came to know that she needed cash, and was secretly angered that he should dare to offer a bribe. But she could not confess her true reason for wishing the exile of Demetrius without letting Aksakoff know about the plot; therefore, of the two evils she chose the less. But she resolved to take no Russian gold. This cynical foreigner should learn that a strictly virtuous Englishwoman cannot be bought. It was commendable in these augurs that they did not wink at one another.

Their reappearance at the tea-table was greeted with shrieks of joy from Lady Richardson, whose emotions were invariably noisy. "Leah! Leah!" she cried, overcome by maternal love and pride, "Billy has won you twelve thousand francs."

"Twelve thousand five hundred," corrected Sir Billy, who was disposing of tea and cake and sandwiches in a way which argued long abstinence.

"Five hundred pounds," translated Captain Lake.

"Oh, you dear, clever boy!" said Lady Jim, coming rapidly to the table to kiss her catpaw. "Halves, of course."

Sir Billy shook his head and tried to keep cool, for the kiss rather upset his dignity. "I am more than repaid," said he gallantly.

"So I should think," murmured Askew, who would have doubled the amount for a similar attention.

Mamie overheard, and recalled a phrase she had never used before, but which suited her impersonation of the American girl as--she is not. "Don't put the banana-peel under your own foot, sonny!"

"What *do* you mean?" asked the mystified islander.

Miss Mulrady glanced at Lady Jim's back, then winked at Askew to intimate that she had remarkably good eyesight; also, that kissing married women led to D.C. cross-examinations; also,--but there was no end to the many meanings of that wink. Lord Burleigh's head-shake, in *The Critic*, Act II., scene 1, could not have been more eloquent.

Meanwhile applausive adjectives buzzed round Billy's head. He fought his trente et quarante battle o'er again, between hasty mouthfuls, while his mother, thanking Providence for having bestowed on her such a son, murmured ecstatic asides to Katinka Aksakoff. It was the apotheosis of the modern child.

Leah counted her gains, placed them safely in one of those wonderful feminine pockets unknown to man, then gave a passing thought to the virtuous Hengists.

"We must get back, dear," she warned Lady Richardson. "Katinka, darling"--this was for Aksakoff's benefit--"do come over and see me. We have so much to talk about."

"I shall be delighted," replied the girl, flushing with joy, and really was so. The prospect of unlimited conversations on the subject of demi-gods, and their ways with a sympathetic friend, allured her towards an hour of happiness. What was left of Lady Jim's conscience smote her; she felt almost sorry for her dupe. But, with the premeditated self-deception of people who rearrange biblical texts for the palliation of pet sins, she reflected that a fool's paradise for Katinka was better than no paradise whatsoever.

Monsieur Aksakoff said no more. He and Lady Jim understood one another perfectly, and it was useless to add touches to a finished picture. With cordial stiffness he sped his guests on their way through the town and the glare of the electrics down to the station-lift Mamie and her supple vicomte shook hands midway; but Askew and Captain Lake insisted upon seeing the ladies safely into a comfortable compartment.

Billy was disgusted. "One man's enough to run this show," protested Billy.

"Don't talk American slang," rebuked his mother, and pelted the men with breathless adieux. "Goodnight, Reggy, so very charming, our day! Mr. Askew, goodnight--so very amusing! We've had a ripping time."

"And the mother-kettle calls my pot black," Billy breathed to Leah.

She paid no attention. Askew was trying to extort an invitation to San Remo, with eloquent eyes and persuasive lips. But a recollection of his four-and-twenty hours in the vicinity without calling, added to a resentment that he should have experimented with his system in the unauthorised company of a much too attractive girl, made her ignore his hints. Moreover, being an ex-sailor and

undiplomatic, he would probably prove so affectionately honest, that the Hengists might--and if the Hengists did, then "adieu grapes, the vintage is over." Julia and her serious spouse would never understand the need of a grass-widow for amusements of this sort. While her Ulysses wandered they expected her to be a replica of Penelope, that dull woman who was so fond of speeches and sewing.

"Come to Curzon Street in a fortnight," she advised, and the train departed, leaving him to muse on the "ars amatoria," as understood in the navy.

"I hope you have enjoyed yourself, dear," said Lady Richardson, arranging Billy's tie and kissing Billy's nose, but addressing Leah; "I'm sure you ought to have. This darling has won you pots."

Lady Jim nodded, rather wearily. The cackle of the hen over her chick worried her, and she retreated to the most distant corner, bored by maternal fussiness. This visit had taken her a step farther, but it was most annoying that success should make her feel uncomfortable. Aksakoff, misapprehending her reasons as he did, would certainly assist her materially. But Katinka,--bur-r-r-r! Why couldn't conscience quit worrying?

CHAPTER XVII

Even the skilful find it no easy matter to drive a kicking, squealing team. The off-horse must be flicked into decorum, the near leader soothed, the wheelers, bearing the heat and burden of the day, encouraged into pulling with a will. Then, a deft hand on tugging reins, a quick eye for the deviations of the road, some knowledge of mouths, tender and hard, and manifestations of that will which makes of vehicle and quadrupeds a coherent whole--these things must be attributes of the god in the car. Likewise of the "Dea ex machina," although Lady Jim was in and not out of the vehicle. Enthroned with whip and ribbons, she

drove a team of five. And in the odd number lay the difficulty of bringing the car of Destiny to the selected stables.

For by this time, rejecting an overruling Providence other than the fetish, who was a domestic god and biased, Leah looked upon herself as her own omnipotent and triumphing Destiny. She would, so she decided, expunge Jim, utilise Askew and Katinka, obliterate Demetrius, and assist Muscovite politics through Aksakoff. This team, in harness, and rendered obedient by blinkers, she controlled with considerable judgment, and made, single-hearted, for her goal. That the actual Destiny, whose rôle she affected to play, might upset her smoothly-running chariot by a judiciously placed and unlooked-for stone, she never paused to consider. So far as she could see, the course was clear to the prize--a money-bag, which she would seize as a victorious widow of the wrong sort.

Askew was the odd animal of the team, the fifth wheel on her chariot, though he was less like a horse than a troublesome and over-faithful dog. Notwithstanding her prohibition, he invaded San Remo, played a most exasperating Patience on a monument along the promenade, and dodged her angry eyes round convenient street-corners. She could not go abroad but what he turned up in unexpected quarters, nor could she remain at home without his appearing, to excuse, on frivolous pretexts, a wholly unnecessary visit. Luckily, the Hengists approved of his frank looks and modest manners, else she might have been compromised. Even in easy-going Italy such cicisbeism was annoying.

Later, Lady Jim returned to London, for that season invented by man, and left him to kick his heels in cross isolation. But, even before the Curzon Street house could be warmed, he rang the bell, and presented himself in the character of a martyr. For the sake of the future Leah kept him in the team, but she gave him more of the whip than he liked, and also--ironically--a marked almanack, limiting his visits. But that she had some liking for him, and much use, she would have bundled him into the arms of the fixture, with strict orders to give those same arms a legal right to embrace him for ever. But Askew himself put an end to that chance of being safely bestowed.

"What will Marjory say if you make my house your hotel?" she asked, when he appeared on the fifth day of the week for the eighth time, and at afternoon tea, too, when she, with a hard day's pleasure behind her, was recruiting for the night's fatigue.

"Nothing," he asserted, sulkily and guiltily; "she has no right to control my actions."

"That depends upon your feelings towards your future wife."

"She is not my--I mean, we have broken it off."

"What!" Lady Jim was frankly exasperated. She as a married woman, and he as an engaged man, could platonise to any extent; but he free, and she shortly to be a widow--what then? She would no more make him her husband than she would allow Demetrius to lead her to the altar. And here he was, selfishly placing himself in an eligible position for the very matrimony she declined to contemplate.

"Marjory and I decided we were not suited," he explained, but timidly, because her eyes flashed. "She takes half the income, and marries that fox-hunting ass. I am free with the rest of the money;" he waited for congratulations which never came. "I thought you would be pleased," he blundered.

"And pray why should I be pleased?"

"I believed--I fancied--you--you liked me," he stuttered, growing red.

"Tolerably--as an engaged man."

"Then you've been playing with me?" he cried; "you don't love me?"

"Did I ever tell you so?"

"No; but I thought----"

"Your vanity thought! Go on."

"Oh, Leah----"

"Kaimes--which is my married name."

Askew gasped. Her amazing impudence reduced him to staring silence. She had lured him to her feet with sweet looks and significant smiles and cooing words, till he had been deceived into thinking that her passion was as strong and as true

as his own. Now she reminded him that she was--married. "Oh!" he gasped again, and Lady Jim laughed shortly. Her cat-nature was enjoying this mouse-play.

Visitors had come and gone, and they were alone in the dainty drawing-room, with an untidy tea-table. Askew, having escorted her home from Ranelagh, had waited for an hour with stubborn patience for this solitude of two. His end had been gained, and now--he looked helplessly round, as though seeking for some third person to explain if his charmer were a demon or a woman. "Oh!" he said, once more.

"Nearly six," said Leah, consulting her bracelet. "How long do you intend to stand there saying 'Oh!'?" and she mimicked him.

"Leah!"

"Lady James Kaimes!"

"Not even Lady Jim," he said, clenching his brown hands. "Oh, you--you----" His voice became inarticulate with sheer anger.

"Pray consider that you are in my house," she reminded him coldly.

"I'll never come here again."

"That is as you choose."

"But I can't live without you."

"How flattering!"

"And I won't;" he came a step nearer the low chair in which she sat, but her derisive laugh made him pause. "Leah--I--I--love you!" His voice broke, and he stretched out his arms.

"I saw that ages ago."

"Then why did you----did you?" He stopped, and looked at her with imploring eyes. "I thought you loved me," he murmured, choking.

"Oh, you thought!" said she, ironically.

"Is it not true? Have I been deceived? No!" he flung out a beseeching hand; "don't speak--I cannot bear to hear the truth. Let me go--let me go," he stumbled towards the door, blindly. "You have broken my heart; but I'll go away--far away--to South America, and--and--oh, my God!" he leaned against the wall and covered his face with his hands.

Lady Jim might have been in the stalls of a theatre for all the personal feeling she had hitherto shown. But his last words brought self uppermost. If he went to South America, he would certainly see Lola Fajardo, and, possibly, might come face to face with Jim. Recognition of an admitted corpse would spoil Jim's game and her own. Askew, for she put herself in his place, would certainly make things unpleasant, and she did not wish to provide a scandal in high life for circulating extra editions of newspapers during the silly season. Besides, he was really a nice boy, and she would miss his good looks and canine attentions. Both circumstances and inclinations demanded that she should keep him under her eye. An explanation came to her while he sobbed at the door--looking very ridiculous, she thought--and she made use of it, to soothe his sorrow and save herself.

"You silly boy," she began, and the beginning produced an effect she was far from foreseeing.

"Silly! Yes, I am silly," he admitted between his teeth, and flinging back his head to regard her with fierce, wet eyes. "I am silly to have believed in you and in your false affection;" before she could protest against this language--she had risen to do so--he hurled himself across the room, and gripped her wrists so tightly that she could have screamed with pain. "You shan't treat me in this way--do you hear, you shan't. I'm not going to be whistled to your feet like a dog and then kicked aside. Married! Yes, you are married, as you were when you whistled. But hang your husband and damn your husband--he has no claim on you, other than a legal one. Mine you are, and mine you shall be. I tell you, Leah"--he shook her in his anger--"that you must leave this man, and come with me. You must--you must!"--he dragged her hands to his breast--"you shall!"

"Harry!" She gasped his name in sheer surprise.

"Yes. Harry--the fool, if you will; the man, as you shall find."

"How--how dare you?"

"Because I do dare, and I shall dare more, if you play football with my heart. Why couldn't you leave me alone? Why couldn't you stick to the man whose name you bear? Don't struggle, for you shan't be free till I have had my say out. You made me love you--now I shall make you love me. You and your society rubbish, and gimcrack rules, and polite lies, and make-believe of truth! You with--ah-r-r-r!" he shook her again--"you over-civilised coquette, you Circe-of-many-wiles, you ruin of honest men! Do you think that I, who am flesh and blood, care for your lady and gentleman humbug? No, no! I am a man, you a woman, and we are one; you hear--one. If not, I'll put a bullet in your head and another through my own. You have fooled many, you shan't fool me. There!" he flung her roughly from him; "now you can ring for your servants, to put me to the door."

With bruised wrists and wide-open eyes Leah stood dumfounded. Jim, at his worst, had never been like this. If he had been she would have truly loved him. At the moment she very nearly loved Askew, recognising in his outburst that masterful nature which every woman adores and succumbs to. In spite of her dexterity in playing with amorous fire, it really seemed as though she was burning her fingers on this occasion. Naturally, she enjoyed the experience. This reversion to cave-life thrilled her pulses. Had Leah been capable of loving anything with a beard she would have then and there fallen at Askew's feet and implored him to trample on her. But her absolute ignorance of the strongest of passions, save self-love, snatched the victory in--what would have been to an ordinary woman--the hour of defeat.

"Well," she said, admiration struggling with anger, "you are a brute!"

The man, still panting from conflicting passions, acted strangely and foolishly, as men do at crucial moments. He smoothed his hair, arranged his tie, and pulled down his waistcoat, not looking at her but into a near mirror. Yet he saw her astonished face at second hand, and smiled grimly.

"I can be a brute," said he, ominously quiet; "but you haven't seen me at my worst yet."

"Good heavens!" This was undoubtedly a man--*the* man--the dominating male, the genuine lord of creation, whose animal honesty can rend the cobweb

entanglements of the female sex, and does rend them, when the bandage of love inopportunately slips. Defiance would not lure him again to his proper position at her feet; and she was half afraid of the might her trickiness had evoked. But in woman's weakness lies woman's strength, and Delilah pulled down the corners of her mouth to subjugate Samson.

"My poor wrists!" she murmured.

Askew wheeled from the mirror, shied, and winced; but his mouth and eyebrows were still three straight lines.

"My poor wrists!" reiterated the temptress, moving towards her pre-historic man; "see--you have bruised them."

He could see that he had; they were under his eyes, under his very nose, but he threw aside his head, with the modern equivalent of a word which a cave-man might have used in some such plight. Adam was weakened into aggressive firmness.

Eve offered a more tempting apple. "If you really loved me"--tears emphasised the murmur.

"Leah--darling!"

He was again in the toils, and kissing the bruised skin madly, with feverish lips. "How could I be so cruel?" he mumbled, and slipped to her victorious feet. "Oh! oh! oh!" in three distinct keys. "Forgive."

"If you will promise not to leave me," she whispered tenderly.

"Never! never! never! never!" a kiss on alternate hands for each word.

Circe's magic having evoked the brute, she knew thoroughly the sort of animal she had to deal with. Considering that she had no feeling of love, or even pity, to create fervour, Leah acted admirably. Cooing like a mother over her babe, and with a seraphic look, she bent above the tame animal, less to caress him than to make sure that the halter was round his neck.

"You foolish, hot-headed boy! Do get up and talk sensibly!"

The subjugated obeyed meekly, all the fire out of his veins, and sat like a whipped schoolboy in a distant chair, which she indicated with regal indignation. "For," said Leah, as if she were announcing an entirely new fact, "I am a married woman;" and she slipped behind the tea-table to prevent further demonstrations.

"As if I didn't know," sighed Askew, disconsolately.

"Then why did you behave so badly, you wicked boy?"

"Because jewellers' windows are tempting."

"Jewellers' windows?"

"You look into them, and see pretty things you can't buy. Naturally, a fellow wants to smash the glass and----"

"I understand the parable. But a thief has to reckon with the law, and so has a married woman. You would not like to see me divorced, Harry?"

"I would like to see you my wife," he retorted, evasively and stubbornly.

"Impossible! I am already a wife. If I eloped with you, what respect could you have for me?"

"I should have whatever you liked, including you."

"Which I don't like, and won't give," said Leah, indignantly. "In you I looked to find a friend, and I find nothing but ungoverned passion, that would drag the object of his adoration in the mud. Oh! oh!"--out came the inevitable handkerchief--"how I have been deceived!"

By this time, the brute, with a penitent tail between its legs, was beginning to believe itself entirely in the wrong. Lady Jim, seeing this, became more than ever a tender woman. "I forgive you," she declared, plaintively, from behind a handkerchief mopping dry eyes; "this scene will be as though it had never been."

"But my feelings," rebelled the cave-man, sulkily.

"Will always be those of sacred friendship for a much-tried woman."

"How can they be, when----?"

"When you have made such a fool of yourself? Ah, my poor Harry, forget your folly. Remember only that I forgive you."

"I don't exactly mean that," grumbled poor Harry, scenting sophistry, but unable to prevent the war being carried into his camp. "You--well----you see Oh, hang it, Leah, you know that I love you."

"Not with that true love which is at once tender and respectful."

These sentiments were really noble, but somehow the bewildered man was not in the mood for copy-book philosophy. "You offer me a stone and call it a beautiful loaf," said he, bitterly, and with heat.

"Another parable! How biblical you are becoming!" said Lady Jim, desperately weary and with her eye on the clock. "I do not understand, nor do you, my poor boy."

"I understand that you have made a fool of me," he snapped brusquely.

"Oh no! Nature has been beforehand there," she retorted, beginning to lose her temper with a man who would explain. "Don't be silly, Harry! Go home, and think of our future."

"*Our* future!" He leaped to his feet with a shining face.

Leah regretted the misused pronoun, and began to anticipate renewed melodrama. But her little tin god, pitying a votary whose nerves were jangled by stupid honesty, sent a seasonable visitor.

"His Grace the Duke of Pentland," announced a grandiloquent footman, flinging wide the door.

"Don't look so disgusted!" Leah flung an angry whisper in Askew's lowering face as she sailed forward to meet her father-in-law. "How are you, Duke? This is a surprise--a delightful one, of course. I never expected so pleasant a visitor."

The room was tolerably dim, and the Duke had not the keen sight of his youth. "Mr.--Mr.----!" hesitated His Grace.

"Mr. Askew," chimed in Lady Jim, glad that the mask of twilight was on the younger man's very cross face. "He's just going. You know Mr. Askew, of course, Duke. I met him at Firmingham. Must you really go, Mr. Askew? So sorry! We may meet at Lady Quain's to-night--I look in there for half an hour. Good-bye for the present. So kind of you to see me home from Ranelagh! Very dull, wasn't it?" and, rattling on to drown any too tender word he might let slip, she hustled him to the door.

"Our future!" breathed the inconvenient third, opening the gate of paradise most reluctantly.

"Even the brutes have instincts, if not sense," snapped Lady Jim, scathingly, and Adam, without Eve, took his solitary way down the stairs, to be dismissed into a cheerless world by an indifferent footman.

To prevent interruption, Leah closed the door herself, and switched on the electrics, before she returned to her untimely visitor.

"Will you be long, Duke?" she asked, again consulting the clock. "I have to dress for dinner. Mrs. Martin's, you know: a stupid woman with a bad cook. Such a bore!"

"I wonder you care to see people when Jim's away," said Pentland, fretfully, and she noted suddenly his aged looks.

Lady Jim felt inclined to retort with the proverb of the absent cat and the jubilant mice, but she really felt sorry for the old man's drooping mouth and additional wrinkles.

"I won't see any one, if you like, Duke--I'm sure it's no pleasure to make conversation without ideas. Do let me ring for hot tea--you look so tired. Sit down in this chair--and the cushion--there!" She made him comfortable with genuine womanly sympathy, wondering, meanwhile, what was ageing him.

"No tea, my dear. I can only wait for a few minutes; my carriage is below. Tired? Yes, I am very tired; worried, also."

"Nothing wrong, I hope," murmured Leah, sympathetically.

"Jim, my dear--poor Jim! Have you heard about his health lately?"

"Oh yes! Last week I received a few lines, and he said that he felt ever so much better. His cough is almost gone."

"Ah," said Pentland, sadly; "like all consumptives, he is too hopeful."

Leah became nervous and anxious. Had Jim been obliterated at last? "What is it?" she demanded irritably. "Is he--is he?" her tongue could not form the lying word.

"Worse--yes, much worse," said the Duke, rubbing his forehead and producing a letter. "This is from Demetrius. We may expect--oh, my poor son!" and he almost broke down.

"I don't trust these doctors," remarked Lady Jim, skimming the letter with a feeling that Demetrius was really too imaginative. "They always shout wolf, when the animal is miles away. Don't worry."

"But you see, Demetrius says that poor Jim may go off at any moment--and Demetrius is a clever man."

"He may be mistaken. I have heard of surprising recoveries."

Pentland shook his head, and groaned. "Not Jim. I had a conviction that I should never see him again when we parted in this very room."

"It's absurd!" argued Leah, artfully. "Jim was quite well till he caught that stupid cold at Firmingham. Why should he go off suddenly?"

"What they call galloping consumption is----"

"I can't believe it. Nothing would surprise me more than to hear of Jim's death;" and she soothed her conscience with the reflection that this speech was perfectly true, considering Jim had the strength of a bull and the appetite of a shark.

"If I lose him----"

"You won't lose him. I'll send a cable to Demetrius, and if Jim is really so sick, I'll go out and nurse him."

Pentland's face lighted up, and he pressed her hand. "How good of you, my dear! It will ease my mind; but--" he hesitated--"I never thought you cared enough about Jim to inconvenience yourself."

"Jim has given me very little reason to care for him," said Leah, with some bitterness. "If he had been a better husband, I should have been a different woman;" she used the stale argument tactfully and regretfully.

"Yes--er--I'm afraid that's true," said the Duke, recalling his son's peccability; "but he is so ill. Forgive and forget, Leah."

"For your sake, if not for Jim's," she said gracefully. "I'll send the cable this very night."

And she did. When Pentland, overflowing with outspoken approbation of her correct conduct, took his leave, she went to her desk and hunted out a cypher with which Demetrius had supplied her. It would not do to let the postal authorities know of their schemes, and the cypher was a particularly intricate one. Leah spent an hour in concocting her cablegram, and was late for dinner in consequence. But she had a good appetite, all the same, in spite of the bad food and the dull conversation. For, on their way to Kingston, Jamaica, were a few lines in cypher, a translation of which would have been of great interest to the father-in-law, who thought her so womanly and good.

"Duke wants me to nurse Jim," ran the cypher, when Demetrius used the key. "Wire that there is no need."

If Jim had really been dying, she would not have altered a single word.

CHAPTER XVIII

An urchin throws a stone into the horse-pond. Circles; form, not only in the still water, but in the fluent air, to enring invisibly our sphere. And who can say to what limit they recede, if limit there be? So with a carelessly selected, hastily flung word. Had Lady Jim said *your* future, Askew, assuming no coupling, would have grumbled himself back into tame-catism and canine contentment with casual head-pats. But, *our* future! The pronoun bulked portentous. Its three letters encompassed, to the lover's prolific imagination--divorce, remarriage, a life-long duet and amorous communings in the highest paradise attainable by those yet moving in time.

Lady Jim, less philological, gave him to understand, that a single word could by no means embrace such various interpretations. She again emphasised her matronhood, called Askew's attention to the spotless reputation he wished to smirch, and intimated that poor Jim's illness precluded her from thinking of anything save poor Jim's possible decease. "In which sad case," mourned Leah, "we could renew our conversation without reproach."

"A widow has no bridesmaids, I believe?" hinted Askew, reflectively. She hinted back with sweet smiles, "Don't you prefer a quiet wedding?" And on this adjustment of the situation he built castles, believing the foundation to be sound. Strangely enough, in so honest a gentleman, the heartlessness of utilising possibilities connected with the Kaimes' vault never occurred to him. Which proved, without need of words, the essential selfishness of the feeling he miscalled love.

On this arrangement Lady Jim frolicked gaily through the remaining weeks of the season, well content that things were as they were. A Jamaica cablegram, which--it designedly not being in cypher--she could and did show to the Duke, informed both that a wifely nurse was needless. The last word of the communication promised a letter, which duly arrived. This last also was a public document, Demetrius being too cunning to detail criminality in black and white. Pentland and Leah read the letter cheek by jowl. Lord James was a trifle better, said the script, and if able to outlast the voyage, would return to England, en route for Algiers. Lady James could then nurse him into health, say, at Biskra.

"Thank heaven," quavered the Duke, not reading between the lines, as did his better-informed daughter-in-law. "We'll make a party and go there for the autumn. Frith will be delighted."

"On Jim's account?" inquired Leah, dryly. "Rather an effort, Duke."

"On my account," rebuked the old man. "Frith knows that if Jim is to leave us"--his voice faltered and fell--"I should like to see him depart."

"Why does the prodigal son always banquet on the calf?" mused Lady Jim, restoring the letter to her pocket.

"My dear, many failings require many excuses."

"So it seems. Selfish people receive more praise for one creditable action, than do those kind-hearted fools who spend their lives in self-denial."

"We must encourage the good seed to grow, my dear."

She laughed unpleasantly. "It usually springs up wild oats, with over-attention!" and she departed to consider the inexplicable growth of green bay-trees.

Lord Frith had never given his father the slightest trouble; he was a model son, an admirable husband; his friendships were staunch, and his life clean--yet Pentland contented himself with perfunctory praise of these qualities. He expected his eldest son to be a domestic Bayard, as the unimaginative Marquis had shown no desire to sow the wind. Jim, on the other hand, left the reaping of his whirlwind to doting relatives. Devourer of husks with congenial swine, and caring only for his large, healthy, greedy self, he had never done a kind act or shown a filial trait. A spendthrift, a rogue in grain, cursed by many men, blessed by no woman, he--this profligate egotist--was dealt with not only tenderly, but in a way calculated to assure him that he was a pearl without price. His notorious failings were covered by the phrase that "he was his own worst enemy," and the presumed possession of good qualities, never manifested, entitled him to paternal pity. Leah, an easy-going sinner herself, was not hard on those who dwelt in glass houses. But this gilding of Jim's base metal made her gorge rise.

"What's the use of being good?" she moralised, as her brougham sped towards Curzon Street. "Kindness is looked upon as weakness, and the more generous one is, the more those who don't know the meaning of the word sponge and sneer. If you are really bad, sham philanthropists reclaim you and cocker you up, and praise you loudly if you say 'Hang' instead of 'Damn!' A sinner repents, and Heaven is a-flutter; a saint makes one slip, and the world yells hypocrite. A pious person, neither white nor black, is left alone, as the majority are of that mottled

complexion. To be really good is to be hated; to be extremely bad means excuses, help, and trumpeting. Frith gets the kicks without deserving them, and Jim the half-pence he has never earned. Clever Jim, who has chosen the world's better part."

It will be seen that Leah, being of the world, judged as the world, and yet with greater discernment. In one way she was right. It is generally your sinner who gobbles up the cakes and ale. But Lady Jim--no very ardent Bible student--misread texts, or rather, read her own material meaning into them. Therefore, although conversant with green bay-trees--did she not dwell in a grove of such?--her memory did not recall the axe that might be laid to the roots thereof. The Seventy-third Psalm might also have assisted her to a better understanding of undeserved worldly prosperity, had she done other than gabble it hastily, when it happened to come into the service. But the fetish which stood to her in place of the Living God did not encourage spiritual explorations, and Leah saw life as a comprehensible stretch of time, limited by birth or death. The hereafter--if any--she could not conceive, knowing only the present as the real, the actual, and the true. Therefore did she grudge Jim his undeserved coddlings. Had he lain on a bed of his own making, it would have been justice--strict justice; but that fools should prepare him a feather mattress and downy pillow seemed, and really was, intolerable. Thinking of the Duke's wasted and misplaced affection, Leah plucked the fruit of her Tree of Knowledge. "Good people need missionaries," said Lady Jim.

However, as Jim and she had occupied separate rooms for many a long day, his featherbedism troubled her little. Also, Askew had been brought to heel by the promise of future bones. The plot was being rounded off in far Jamaica without her aid, and what with Sir Billy's winnings and a moderate cheque cajoled out of the Duke, she had enough to keep the wolf from the Curzon Street door. On the whole, things could not be improved, and it only remained to exercise patience. But of this virtue Leah possessed little, and did not care to expend what she had in twiddling her thumbs at home. Jim was away, so she could play--and did. A masked ball at Covent Garden amused her immensely; the plays condemned by Sir Billy found in her a lenient critic; and now that Pentland had paid off old bills, she ran up new ones with the zest of a woman who required nothing. Also, she went to Epsom, and pulled off a decent sum on a tip breathed into her ear by the racing baronet, whom she had snubbed into slangy admiration. To Hurlingham and Richmond she raced a split-new motor-car of the latest pattern, and exhibited her nerve and skill in the Park. Charity bazaars, Savoy dinners,

bridge parties, Sunday river excursions, and such-like time-killers beheld her in varied and tasteful frocks, and she also dined with those friends upon whose cook she could rely. Altogether, she enjoyed the life of a busy idler, and had that remarkably agreeable time which magnificent health, comparative wealth, and a conscience of no importance would give to such a woman. But her head duly governed her frivolities, and she made no plans for the Cowes week, although she knew a manageable man with a delightful yacht. The daily expected decease of Jim had to be considered, and thoughtful Leah had already designed her mourning. Meanwhile, she babbled of Biskra to Lady Canvey, and rather overdid it.

"Are you and Jim going on a second honeymoon?" inquired that suspicious old dame.

"We are," replied Leah, calmly. "How clever of you to guess it!"

"Humph! The poor wretch must be worse than I thought."

"I see; my affection, to your mind, is too obvious."

"The non-existent can never manifest itself," said Lady Canvey, in scientific English. "Either a miracle has happened to give you a heart, or Jim is dying, and you are getting ready to dance on his grave."

Leah coloured with suppressed anger. This plain speaking annoyed her, and she disliked people who peeped behind the scenes. "Jim and I are not angels, godmother," she said with dignity; "but we're pals enough to make me regret his death. My mourning, though you may doubt it, will be perfectly sincere."

Lady Canvey gave a dry laugh. "See Carlyle on the 'Philosophy of Clothes.' Well, I shan't pay your bill at Jay's."

"Thanks. I don't ask you to. The total might involve a larger cheque than you would care to sign."

"I'm sure of that, my dear, seeing your mourning is to be perfectly sincere."

The impracticable old woman and her god-daughter were alone, else this snapping might not have occurred. Leah had rather neglected Lady Canvey of late, because that astute octogenarian had locked up her cheque-book. But on her

way to an "At Home" she had looked in for a few moments, and sat in the stuffy Victorian room, radiant in a crêpe ninon frock of Parma violet, elaborately flounced, and with a fichu and short sleeves. The dress was simple enough, and she wore little jewellery; but her dazzling neck and shoulders and arms, her glorious hair and calm strong face, would have made her noticeable even in a crowd of picked beauties. Lady Canvey, whose ill-humour was mostly surface-crabbedness, for she preferred losing a friend to withholding an epigram, could not refrain from grudging compliments. But between women these rang hollow.

"You look charming to-night, my dear."

"After the storm, the sunshine," said Lady Jim, smiling at such novel civility. "Well, I appreciate the change. Whatever my faults may be, godmother, you cannot say that I am disagreeable. I always call, in spite of your--your--what shall we say?"

"Home-truths! And you call when it suits you. Humph! Perhaps I am a trifle short-tempered."

"A trifle!"

"Old age has its privileges," Lady Canvey reminded her; "and you can be so cleverly nasty when you like, that it amuses me to bring the worst out of you."

"What a doubtful compliment! Do you extract amusement from the Tallentire girl in the same way?"

"She has no bad in her."

"Quite so, and you never try to bring out the good which does *not* amuse you. Sunday schools are beneficial rather than entertaining. I don't see Miss--what's her name?" and Lady Jim glanced round the room.

"Joan Tallentire," snapped her hostess; "you remember the name well enough. It's fashionable to have a short memory, I suppose."

"For debts," said Leah, sweetly; "but Miss Tallentire?"

"She is looking after her father's house, as the mother is ill."

"Poor woman! I hope Lionel is not preaching at her, to make her worse."

"Lionel isn't always in the pulpit. By the way, Leah, he told me that he had a serious talk with you at Firmingham."

"Did he? Yes! I believe he did give me a dull quarter of an hour. Something about sin, I fancy it was. Parsons have a monomania on that subject."

Lady Canvey made an angry noise in her wrinkled throat. "You're impossible," she pronounced tartly. "Lionel wishes to improve you."

"What about Jim? Charity should commence with his own family."

"Well, my dear, Lionel admires you, and----"

"Oh! He *is* a man, then. I don't think I ever made running with a clergyman; it might be rather fun. I suppose Lionel would recite the Song of Solomon to me--there's lots of love-talk in it. Not very proper talk, either, I'm told. Perhaps Solomon wrote it for married women; he had some experience of them, hadn't he? He collected concubines, didn't he?--just like a stamp-maniac."

"Leah, you're insufferable."

"And impossible!" She rose to go, and arranged the fur-lined Medici collar of her evening wrap in the dim mirror. "But I'm about to be punished for my sins. The Duke made me promise to go to this At Home. Mrs. Saracen, you know--she's one of the submerged Upper Ten, or she married one of them; I forget which, though I know she has something to do with a pickle, or a sauce. Very amusing old thing, too. She gives you a nutshell biography of every one before she introduces."

"What on earth for?"

"Oh, so that you may be warned against people's skeletons. Mrs. Saracen points out the cupboard and tells you not to open it, and of course you do."

Lady Canvey chuckled. "Rather clever. And her friends----?"

"Male and female, I believe. She collects people who have done something."

"In the criminal way?"

"She would, if the law allowed them out of gaol. But at present she contents herself with freaks. I don't go to middle-class menageries as a rule, but at the Duke's request I patronise this one."

"Come to-morrow and tell me all about it."

"If you'll promise to be nice."

Her godmother was silent for a moment. "Leah, my dear," she said at length, taking the gloved hand, "I am sorry we always quarrel when we meet. I really have a corner in my heart for you, and if you were only less--less--" Lady Canvey hunted for the right word--"less exasperating, we should get on excellently."

Lady Jim nodded, squeezed the bony hands, and kissed the wrinkled cheek.

"Let us make a fresh start," she said gently, for she really felt sorry. "I'll come every day while Miss Tallentire is absent and tell you the news."

"That's a good girl. Goodnight. Enjoy yourself, my dear;" and the two parted better friends than they had been for months.

On her way to Mrs. Saracen, who lived in the wilds of Kensington, Leah saw herself in the new character of dry-nurse to a spiteful old harridan, and wondered at her good-nature. Why should she bore herself with a spent octogenarian, whose sole attraction was the possession of money, with which she declined to part? Yet Lady Jim had promised daily visits to this ruin, and what is more, for no reason discoverable to herself, intended to keep her promise, even though there was nothing to be gained by such self-denial. The idea that she, of all people, should do something for nothing, tickled her greatly, and the street-lamps swinging past the brougham flashed on an amused face. She was so pleased with discovering virtue in such an unexpected quarter that she quite forgot to look mournful when her hostess inquired after Jim's health.

The waist upon which the Honourable Mrs. Saracen had prided herself somewhere about the middle of the nineteenth century was now a matter of guess-work. Her stoutness impressed even the unobservant with the conviction that she had eaten her way through life, and was at present engaged in digging a

not-far-off grave with her teeth. And, for her age, she had an astonishingly good set, obtrusively genuine. Her general appearance was in keeping, for she wore her own white hair in smooth bands, under a Waterloo turban, fearfully and wonderfully made, and presented a natural face of winter-apple rosiness, scored with good-humoured wrinkles. As Nature had made her, and Time had aged her, so she was, growing old healthily, if not gracefully. In an alarming dress, many-coloured as Joseph's coat, she wheezed like a plethoric poodle, and rolled in a nautical manner by reason of her bulk. Who would have guessed at a brain hidden in this ponderous mass of adipose?

Yet she was a self-made woman, who had acquired a large fortune by the sale of "Saracen's Sauce." Therefore did current gossip accuse her of beginning life as a cook. A perfect invention, this, as she was a gentlewoman who had, intellectually, married beneath her--that is, she had bought with the sauce money a scampish aristocrat of the Jim Kaimes type, only less manly. He had long since drank himself into the family vault, and had left his wife with one son, who was now in the army. Every one liked Mrs. Saracen, in spite of her eccentricities, and love of glaring colours, and many a society pauper had reason to thank her for timely help. And to cap her good qualities, she professed open pride in the sauce, which appeared on every middle-class dinner-table throughout the three kingdoms.

"Dear Lady James," she wheezed, wagging two fat hands, like a seal its flappers, "how good of you to come! You will find some interesting people here"--she looked round with pride at the collection of lions, old and young, tame and wild, fat and lean, sham and real. "Now, Mr. Wallace here--let me present him. Charming man--very outspoken--great traveller--Zambesi--knows cannibals intimately!" Then, behind a plump hand, whispered a nutshell biography, "Don't mention his wife--divorce."

Thus warned, Leah got on excellently with the lean, brown, keen-eyed man, who confessed to extensive explorations. "Cannibals?--yes, Lady James, I know a few and love them."

"What strange affection, Mr. Wallace! Why?"

"They ate a man I detested. I fear he disagreed with them in death, as he always disagreed with me in life."

Lady Jim laughed. "Is there any one here you would like to make a side-dish of?" she asked, letting her eyes rove.

"No; I am a complete stranger in London. It is the one place I have not explored. But Mrs. Saracen has told me the past of many here, and I can give you histories, if you like."

"Go on, then. Only don't give me dates, else the women here might scratch. I don't know these creatures myself," she went on, with the calm insolence of a great lady; "to me they are like your Central African natives."

"I agree, Lady James--only less civilised."

"In what way?"

"Niggers wear no clothes, and, therefore, are more modest."

"I can quite imagine it. That thin lady over there is evidently of your opinion;" and Leah glanced at a mature damsel who wore just sufficient clothing to prevent interference by the police.

"Miss Fastine? She's a Naturopath, and is trying to revert to primitive simplicity."

"With such a figure she might stop short of the Garden of Eden," said Lady Jim, dryly. "I never heard of a Naturopath. What is it?"

"An American sect, which needs solitude to carry out its theories. The members sleep in the open, cover themselves with earth when they feel sick, and advocate the altogether."

"You are joking, Mr. Wallace."

The traveller stifled a laugh. "Upon my word, Lady James, I am in earnest. The sect really does exist. That stout man talking to Mrs. Saracen belongs to another queer lot. Calls himself an Osteopath."

"What on earth is that?"

"One who cures by vitalising the nerves."

"I am as wise as I was before. Any more freaks?"

"Yonder is a Christian Scientist. And the man on the left advocates Mahomedanism as the State religion in England."

"While the dressmakers charge so ruinously, he'll never induce men to take four wives. And the woman in the red dress?"

"Lady Tansey--a believer in spirits."

"So I should imagine," said Lady Jim, surveying the lady's nose, which was long and thin and the hue of her gown.

"No, no! I talk of heavenly spirits. Lady Tansey has a large circle of departed friends, who rap."

"What a bore! As if one didn't get enough of friends in this world, without worrying them to knock out bad grammar from the next. Really, Mr. Wallace, I begin to think Mrs. Saracen must keep a lunatic asylum."

"Oh dear no," he answered, chuckling. "It is the sane people that are usually shut up."

"Certainly not the disagreeable people," retorted Lady Jim.

"Oh, if you go to those lengths, there would be no society," said Wallace, with a shrug.

The traveller's cynicism exactly suited Leah's humour at the moment, and she made him take her in to supper. Meanwhile, Askew, who had not seen Lady Jim arrive, was watching the grand entrance with a lowering face. He had called at Curzon Street, and thence had borne a message for Leah which he was anxious to deliver. Already he had been bored to distraction with faddists and their whims, and was seriously thinking of slipping away, when Mrs. Saracen bore down on him for the fourth time. Before he could object she had him by the arm, and confronted him with a severe-looking woman, pensive and solitary.

"Do let me introduce you to Miss Galway," she wheezed. "You'll get on so well with Mr. Askew, dear Miss Galway. He's navy, you know, or has been--left it--going to be married. And Mr. Askew, if you can talk of Ph[oe]nician inscriptions

to Miss Galway, she'll entertain you for hours. Quite an authority on Solomon, I believe--very clever, most intellectual!" Then aside, hastily: "Say nothing about her brother--jail!"

Poor Askew! Miss Galway proved to be a limpet, and held on to him desperately, not because he was handsome, but for the sake of the two ears he possessed, into which she could pour her archæological triumphs.

She prosed in a manly voice about Hiram of Tyre and the building of Solomon's Temple, and the probability that its design was copied from the Shrine of Moloch, and the remains that Zerubbabel must have found after the Babylonian captivity, until his poor head buzzed like a saw-mill. In the hope of stopping this endless trickle of nothings he cajoled her to the supper-room. There, at a small table well-covered, Lady Jim ate and drank and chatted, light-heartedly, with a sharp-eyed, sun-dried mummy. She nodded a "How d'y do?" to her sailor, and smilingly observed his entanglement. Luckily for the preservation of Askew's temper, a rival archæologist arrived to discuss Hittite grammar, and he managed to slip away while the male and female dryasdusts wrangled over the probable origin of the Perizzites.

"You haven't been near me all the evening," complained Leah, when Wallace received his congé and Askew sat in the seat of the scornful.

"Didn't see you arrive, worse luck. If you'd been dosed with Hivites and Jebusites and all that truck, as I've been, you'd have a headache, too."

"It's unusual for you to have a headache."

"And inevitable for me to have a heartache."

"On account of that alphabet woman, I suppose. Why don't you feed?"

"No appetite. But if you'll come along to the Cecil----"

"Certainly not. We've been there much too often of late. People will talk."

"Let them! What does it matter?"

"Everything matters, when people have tongues and eyes, and envious natures. Don't be silly. I promised the Duke to stop here for half an hour. And after all, it's

amusing. I never knew such people existed outside *Punch*. Well--what now?" This because, with sudden recollection of an oversight, he brought out an envelope.

"This was waiting at Curzon Street," he explained, handing it across, "and the butler, thinking it might be important asked me to---- Why, what's the matter, Leah?"

It was his turn to inquire, for, reading while he talked, she had suddenly whitened. "Don't call me Leah," she snapped, with the irritation of a shaken woman, then re-read the cablegram, again and again.

"What is it?--what is it?"

"My husband is--dead!" She crushed the paper into a ball, rose to go, and dropped back, overwhelmingly faint. "Oh!" she moaned faintly. For once in her life of shams and sneering and playing with other-world fires she was moved to genuine emotion.

CHAPTER XIX

Leah's emotion--as she felt--was almost cruelly genuine. It bore the trademark of sincerity; it made her heart hammer furiously against her ribs, and drove the blood from her cheeks. Yet she knew that Jim still lived; that the lying cablegram was but a necessary card to play for the winning of large stakes. For once, the expected had happened--that was all. Why then should she exhibit emotions which could not possibly have been caused by the excuse offered to the public. Her heart replied with brutal directness, that she had crossed the Old Bailey Rubicon, and was actually participating in a crime. The last word shook her out of cotton-wool wrappings into a naked world. Up to the receipt of the cablegram

she could have drawn back. Now, fully committed to the adventure, she was compelled to tread a perilous path. A criminal! Yes: she had been one in intention, which mattered little; she was now criminal in fact, and that meant punishment. Her imagination conjured up visions of the possible. The judge spoke, the prison gaped, the bolts shot home, Curzon Street was exchanged for Wormwood Scrubbs. Ugh! But after all, such queasy thoughts were unnecessary. If she had broken the eighth commandment, she fully intended to keep the eleventh and unwritten one, "Thou shalt not be found out."

The truth to Mrs. Saracen, excusing a hasty departure, served to circulate the fiction of Jim's death, which the widow wished to be speedily and widely known. She could not have selected a bell with a better clapper. Promulgated by the "sauce queen," the sad invention shortly became town-talk, and, disseminated by myriad tongues, ran like a prairie fire throughout Society, with a capital letter. A more weighty bag on the postman's back resulted, and commiserating platitudes showered on Leah, as thick as the over-quoted leaves of Vallombrosa. She glanced through many, replied to a few, and burned--very wisely--the majority. Between-whiles her attention was given to parcels from Jay's, and considerations of widows' caps, and the recognition that the feminine uniform of woe clothed with marked distinction a really beautiful mourner. To women, grief has its consolations in crape millinery.

Seclusion was necessary in those days of lamentation, but none the less wearisome. To play the nun, while people scattered to Cowes and the Continent, chafed the chameleon woman. Some intimate sympathisers she received, and to these she matched mournful words with a mournful countenance. With the blinds half down and sal volatile at hand, in a becoming gown, and using a handkerchief, three inches black-bordered, to redden the driest of eyes, Lady Jim held funereal receptions, and spoke in low tones of her late husband's hitherto unknown good qualities. His palpable evils she cloaked with the "his-own-worst-enemy" phrase; and mentioned twice that, if not an angel, he at least had been a man. The visitor addressed made her exit expressing hopes that Lord James was an angel now, and the door closed in time to prevent her seeing Leah's enjoyment of the picture thus cashed on her amused mind. "Jim, an angel!" murmured the widow, wiping away real tears. "He'd bet on his flying."

With the Duke she played her comedy of sorrow very prettily. Pentland and Frith arrived in haste, while the Marchioness hurried on beforehand, to prepare Leah for the interview. But she was already word-perfect in her part. Aware that Lord

Frith would discredit ostentatious grief, she assumed the position of a shocked rather than a broken-hearted widow, though she said nothing but what might have been inscribed on Jim's tombstone. Not a crocodile tear did she shed under Frith's too-observant eyes, but sat near the Duke, holding his gouty lean hand, and skilfully impressed the trio with the belief that she and the deceased had not been so far asunder as was supposed--the corollary of such impression being that she honestly regretted Jim's untimely demise. No more could be expected, even from the most forgiving woman, and no more was demanded by the ducal family.

After these preliminary condolences Pentland suggested that Leah should come to Firmingham for the funeral. It was necessary to agree to this, and she did with graceful readiness; only intimating that she would remain in town, until the remains arrived at Southampton. Even as she made the stipulation, she wondered how Demetrius had contrived to transfer Garth's body from Madeira to Jamaica for the deception.

"I thought poor Jim would have been buried where he died," she remarked tentatively.

The Duke was shocked. "Certainly not. Jim, poor fellow, must rest with his ancestors. We must look upon his face for the last time."

Leah plucked nervously at her black gown, and wondered if the Russian was wise in submitting a substituted corpse to family scrutiny. "They say that death changes people," she ventured uneasily, "and of course, embalming----"

"Just what I said to Bunny," interrupted Lady Frith, in too vivacious a tone for the occasion. "We shall hardly know Jim with the soul out of him."

"My--dear--Hilda!"

"Well, Bunny, you know souls aren't buried."

"They go to a better world, as Jim's has gone," mourned the doting father.

Frith looked doubtfully at his sister-in-law. The less said about Jim's destination, the better: therefore did he crush sentiment with dry business. "I expect Demetrius will arrive with the remains about the end of the month," said he, in the hardest of voices; "after the funeral, we can see about the will."

"It leaves everything to Leah," his father informed him.

"Indeed! And what had Jim to leave behind him besides his character?"

"The insurance money."

"Oh--ah--yes. Jarvey Peel's present. Twenty thousand pounds--eh?"

"And accumulations," supplemented Lady Jim; "but need we talk of such things, now?" and she sighed the conversation back to sentiment.

"Quite so--quite so," quavered the Duke, shaking his head; "terrible loss to you, my dear--and your natural grief, and--hum-hum----" Further fossilised phrases escaped his memory.

"I certainly feel for poor Jim," said Leah, with sedate dignity: "he had his faults, of course; but then, so have I."

"Your kind remembrance of Jim excuses the few you possess," was Pentland's reply; while Frith, compressing his thin lips, made no remark.

Indeed, there was no chance, for Hilda clamoured that Leah should come to her house for beef-tea and consolation. She had never agreed with her more sceptical husband about the Curzon Street menage, and credited Lady Jim with the requisite virtues of a genuine widow.

"Your strength must be kept up, dear," she babbled, as though she expected Leah to faint then and there. "I know exactly how you feel. Just as I should, if Bunny became an angel. But we must all die, dear Leah, and death is the gate of life, and----"

"Can't you leave these proverbial condolences to Lionel?" broke in her exasperated husband.

"Oh, Bunny"--with a wail--"the sacred dead."

"Let the child talk," commanded Pentland; "she expresses my feelings."

Thus encouraged, the child did talk, and Lady Jim listened with a bent head to original remarks about Time, the great consoler, and meetings on a golden shore, to part no more, and keeping the loved memory green, and bowing to the inevitable, and such-like official utterances, without which no funeral is complete. When Hilda stopped for want of breath and memory, Leah kissed her with the affection of one deeply moved, and observed that she was tired. And indeed she was--bored to death, in fact. So the Marchioness, pleased with her plagiarised eloquence, took leave tactfully and tearfully on the Duke's arm. Frith lingered.

"Why don't you laugh?" he said dryly.

"At Hilda in the pulpit? Why should I. She means well."

"Huh! I allude to your demure listening. I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, and, after all, Jim was my brother. But are you really and truly sorry?"

"In a way, if you *will* press for an answer. One can't live five years with a man without missing him at the breakfast-table."

"Hum! Though you and I pretend otherwise, to console my father, we know that Jim was no saint."

"Am I?" she asked, shrugging.

"Politeness forbids my answering that question."

"I don't see what politeness has to do with this interview. Have you remained to make yourself disagreeable?"

"On my honour, no. You're a clever woman, Leah, and as a scamp's wife you have conducted yourself admirably."

"As I am now the scamp's widow, had that not better have been left unsaid?"

Frith shrugged in his turn. "I suppose so, since we have agreed to call black white. But I waited to say that I'll help you in any way you wish."

Leah was surprised, and touched. She and Frith had never been good friends. Apparently, he was not such a bad sort after all. But what was behind this offer?

Her ineradicable suspicion of human nature made her doubt, though she spared him the question. "It is very good of you," said she, cordially, "but with the insurance money and this house, which your father says I can retain, I shall do very well. There is no need for you to open your purse, or your heart."

The Marquis hunched his shoulders and let them drop. "Hum," he repeated, biting his forefinger; "you will be marrying again?"

"What has that to do with you?" she flashed out, haughtily.

"Well, you bear our family name," he reminded her, "and Demetrius----"

Lady Jim felt qualmish. "Demetrius?" she echoed faintly. What could Frith possibly have to say about the prime mover in the plot?

"The man is crazy about you," said he, frowning.

"I can't help lunatics being at large," said Leah, reassured as to his meaning and at once on the defensive. "Have I encouraged him?"

He hastened to protest. "Oh no. As I said before, your conduct as Jim's wife has been admirable--truly admirable. But I should not like to see you marry Demetrius."

"Why should you think me willing to do so?"

"I don't, since the man is a foreigner and poor and untitled."

"He can be a prince and wealthy, if he chooses to be reconciled with the Russian authorities."

"Even then, Leah, do you really like this man?"

"As a clever doctor and an amusing talker--yes. Well?"

Frith, baffled and perplexed, bit his finger again. "He is devoted to you; they talk of it at the clubs. No, no," hurriedly, as she turned crimson with indignation; "there's not a word said against you. But this absurd infatuation--and you a widow; these foreigners go to ridiculous lengths, so you see----"

"I certainly do not see," interrupted Leah, with conviction. "Did you offer assistance so that you might meddle?"

"Oh no, no," protested the Marquis, looking shocked; "but you have behaved so well as Jim's wife----"

"That is the third time you have said so, and I am by no means stupid. It seems to me," she looked straight at him, "that you believe M. Demetrius will ask me to marry him."

"Yes, I do think so."

"Will it ease your mind if I say that I have no intention of accepting any impertinent proposal he may make?"

"It will and it does," said Frith, bluntly. "I should not like to see you throw yourself away on that man. Should you marry again----"

"It will be entirely my own affair."

"Of course, of course. All the same----"

"Quite so! Good-day, Lord Frith."

He smiled grimly, seeing that she would not permit him to finish a single sentence. "Am I to take your use of my title as an intimation that we are to be strangers?"

"To the extent of supervision, yes."

"But you can't manage things unaided."

"That also is my business. As your interference is concerned with M. Demetrius, and I have set your mind at rest on that point, there is no more to be said."

"As you please. Still, this Demetrius----"

"Oh, Demetrius," she echoed, enraged by this parrot repetition. "I never wish to hear his name or set eyes on his face again."

This was true enough. Now that the Russian had served her turn he could go hang; she had no further use for him, and he could whistle for his well-earned wages. When Frith, after further interrupted expostulations, took his leave, Lady Jim sat down, chin on hand, to consider this town-talk. The love-sick babbling of Demetrius troubled her little. No scandal could attach to a Diana who never hunted the noble quarry, man; and Leah was such a known lover of herself that even scandal refrained from giving her a rival. Still, the Russian was pertinacious, and could be vindictive; he had fulfilled her bidding for a certain price, and that price he would assuredly demand. Make him her second husband she would not. He belonged to Katinka, who could keep him and welcome. The remembrance of the daughter suggested the useful father.

Aksakoff, unfettered by honourable prejudices, certainly could help her, for the attaining of his own ends, if Demetrius became troublesome. Could she lure him to Paris, his disappearance from her life would only be a question of days, perhaps hours. But, for the moment, she did not see how to export her accomplice to Siberia, via the gay city, without becoming a more active agent than was wise. One Russian had her--there was no blinking the fact--under his thumb; and to remove that pressure, in the only way in which it could be removed, meant the substitution of a similar thumb. She would merely jump from the frying-pan into the fire--both equally uncomfortable.

On this account, and lest she should exchange King Log for King Stork, Leah hesitated to enlist Aksakoff's assistance. Luckily, there was no need to come to an immediate decision. She had three weeks at least to consider the matter. The funeral, the procuring of the insurance money, natural grief, for the tricking of the world, and the regulation period of mourning--she could oppose these obstacles, should Demetrius press his suit unduly hard. This being so, she flung off the burden for the time being, although the necessity of settling the matter, sooner or later, haunted her thoughts. Such insistence of the disagreeable broke up her rest, and she would waken at dawn, to plot escape. Chloral, occasionally, aided her to sleep the difficulty out of her head: but she detested drugs that demand extortionate repayment for their kindness, and used narcotic discreetly. A week of these haggard hauntings aged her. Anxiety became apparent in hollow eyes and colourless cheeks. One day, with outspoken horror, she discovered an entirely new wrinkle, and noted later that the unexpected opening of a door caused her nerves to jump. Kind friends ascribed such things to commendable sorrow for the dead, and Leah tacitly accepted their comforting and petting on this obvious plea. But not to regret a thousand Jims would she have risked her

beauty; as, after her tongue--for Leah put brains before looks--it was her keenest-edged weapon with which to fight the world, and was supremely powerful to control fools.

Daily the stream of sympathising friends rolled through the dainty drawing-room, and bore Lady Jim away from comedy grief to more pleasant shores, where gossip of he and she and the "tertium quid," interspersed with millinery discussions and shrewd female handling of current society events, made things more tolerable. Lady Richardson babbled herself in, with a box of chocolate from Sir Billy--a consolation not unpalatable to Leah, who liked Billy and loved sweets. "Both being acquired tastes," said Lady Jim, but not to the little mother.

"So thoughtful of him, isn't it?" chattered Lady Richardson, who was coloured in subdued tints, with a gown to match, for the visit. "The dear boy! He said to me that we must prevent you from breaking your heart."

"And prescribes eating," said Leah, humorously. "I never knew Sir Billy was so young. Thank him for me, Fanny, and tell him that when I think of taking a second I'll give him a look in."

"Oh, Billy has thought of that already--such a boy as he is. You're sure to have a badly spelt proposal from him, dear. But seriously speaking, will you,--oh, of course you will."

"Why should I?--you have not."

"My heart is buried in the grave of Billy's father," murmured Lady Richardson, pensively.

"Dig it up again."

"Well, there's Reggy Lake, of course; but he's so poor."

"All the more reason that he should propose. You have a good jointure."

"Settled entirely on myself," said the little woman, shrewdly; then added romantically, "I must be loved for myself alone."

"Oh!" Lady Jim shrugged. "If you expect miracles!"

"Really, Leah!" Her visitor became pinker than her rouge.

"I mean that men are selfish, dear. They always have their eye on the cash-box, you know."

"I hope that won't be your fate, darling," was the spiteful reply, for Lady Richardson always scratched back.

"Oh, my face is my fortune, Fanny. Jim, poor dear spendthrift, has left me with only a few thousands, which won't last long."

"I should think not, in your hands, dear. But there is Mr. Askew and Dr. Demetrius--both admire you."

"Admiration does not necessarily mean marriage. And at present I think more of my loss than of a second husband."

"So sweet of you, and so proper. But you might take a look at the market. Mr. Trent, now, the South African. He's a millionaire."

"So I should think, from his manners."

"Lord Canvey!"

"Would give me a grandmother-in-law of the worst."

"Sir Jacob Machpelah!"

"The man who has taken his name from Abraham's cemetery? I suppose he thought it sounded Scotch. No, thanks. My name is Hebrew, but my tastes are Gentile."

"Johnny Danesbury!"

"A penny doll with a squeak. I want a man."

"Colonel Harrington!"

"He's a brute, without instinct. I begin to think you keep a matrimonial agency, Fanny."

"It wouldn't pay, were you my only client," retorted Lady Richardson, still remembering the miracle dig. "No one seems to satisfy you. I believe you mean to marry Askew, after all. What of him?"

"He's a nice footman, and doesn't ask wages. Aren't these suggestions rather premature? My heart, like yours, may be in my husband's grave."

"I didn't know he was buried yet," said the little woman, crossly. "How impossible you are, darling!"

"Always, when people get on my nerves, dear."

"I believe you want some other woman's husband?"

"Oh dear no! I never covet my neighbour's ass."

Shot and shell were flying rather thickly, and seeing no chance of planting her flag on Leah's bulwarks, Lady Richardson beat a discreet retreat, with Judas kisses and Parthian shots. "So glad if I have cheered you up, dear [kiss]! Bear up and don't break your heart [kiss, kiss]! So sweet your sorrow, and so genuine [kiss, kiss, kiss]!" And having given several Rowlands for one Oliver, Lady Richardson departed.

"Cat!" said Lady Jim to the closed door, and settled to munch Billy's chocolates over Marcel Prévost's *Lettres d'une Femme*.

CHAPTER XX

The supposed remains of Jim Kaimes duly arrived on British ground in charge of an extraordinarily anxious medical attendant, and Lord Frith arranged for their

transfer to Firmingham. There, Leah was already established as Niobe, studiously dismal in the jet-trimmed, crape-flounced equivalent of sackcloth. With the Marchioness, a few decayed cousins, and many hired mourners, connected closely or distantly with the family, she assisted the Duke to lament his Absalom. Therefore, behind lowered blinds, in the twilight atmosphere of the great house, did officially grief-stricken relations move warily on tiptoe, speaking in hushed voices, with downcast eyes, of the deceased and his post-mortem virtues. The apotheosis of the prodigal son, who had thus quietly come home, made the place about as cheerful as a mausoleum.

Limiting the solemnity strictly to the family, Lionel was requested to inter Jim's body, with the rites in which Jim's soul had never believed. Then, for the first time, did he behold Leah in her new character, as hitherto a sympathetic letter had excused a personal interview. Now, face to face, Kaimes considered the advisability, as clergyman, relative, and friend, to administer presumably needed consolation. This last straw broke the widow's overladen back. She had wept with Pentland, mourned with kith and kin, enduring also, for three dreary weeks, twaddling platitudes, written and spoken, by meddlesome well-wishers. These exasperating necessities would have been unendurable, even had Jim been where he deserved to be; but that she should suffer them, when Jim was rejoicing as Mr. Berring and expecting his share of the money she thus laboriously earned, nearly drove her beyond the bounds of decorum. She could have thrown the novel she was reading at Lionel's head, and barely escaped doing so, when he appeared in her sitting-room, almost aggressively sympathetic. But, reflecting that with the funeral would come a cessation of these aggravations, and mindful that the money was almost in her purse, she asked him to be seated and prepared to stomach aphorisms.

"How good of you to come!" she sighed conventionally; then added, to avert, if possible, protracted boredom, "I'm dull company."

"Naturally, Lady James; but I rejoice to see that you are resigned."

"I'm not tearing my hair and gnashing my teeth, if that is what you mean. I will, if you think Jim worthy of such excesses."

"Hush, hush! He is dead."

"I see evidences of that on all sides of me," replied Leah, tartly. "Shouldn't you say that he is not lost but gone before? I believe that is one of the stock phrases of your profession."

Lionel moved uneasily. It was difficult to whitewash Jim, and he could not invent non-existing virtues on the spur of the moment. "He was your husband, remember," was his effort to parry this thrust.

"Oh, Lord, don't I know it? Would I put up with all this, else? Did you come to tell me that Queen Anne is dead?"

"I came to cheer you."

"Go on, then. Tell me a funny story."

The curate looked and felt shocked. "Lady James----"

"Lionel, if you preach I shall scream," cried Leah, developing whirlwind passion, and rising a veritable Bellona; "or else I'll--I'll--oh!" she ripped her handkerchief viciously, while sweeping tempestuously up and down. "I don't know what I'll do, if you play Job's comforter."

Her cheeks flamed, her eyes sparkled, and her voice leaped an octave as she flung the last words at him. Lionel started up, surprised at this sudden anger, and wondered if grief was bringing on hysteria.

"Won't you sit down?" said obtuse man, giving the worst possible advice to overstrung woman. "A little sal volatile----"

"I'm sick of sitting down, and lying down, and sal volatile, and listening to humbug, and wearing black, and being bothered. I've had more trouble over Jim in his death than I ever allowed him to give me in his life. You say the same silly things every one else says--you--you parrot! Can't you be original?"

"Death is such an old-established institution that it is difficult to be original," said Lionel, resuming his chair with a shrug.

"Then I shall talk myself. Yes; I wish to speak plainly, and to you I intend to speak plainly, since you are the only man I respect."

"Thank you!"

"I daresay you are priggish," went on Lady Jim, finding it a marvellous relief to speak loudly and without reserve; "but you are honest in spite of it, and you don't gossip, though you *are* a parson. In trouble I shall always come to you, padre."

"You are in trouble now," hinted Kaimes, smiling at her frankness.

"Eh! What? Yes, of course, Jim's dead." She choked over the lie, and returned to laugh at ease in her chair. "Where has he gone, Lionel?"

"Don't, Lady James! I admit that he had his faults."

"Be honest. He had nothing else but faults."

"No, no! We all have our good points."

"Give me a list of Jim's," she suggested derisively.

"For the moment, I can't think----"

"No; nor you wouldn't if you thought for a century. Jim is as bad as they make 'em."

"*Was*--if you will abuse him."

"Oh yes, I forgot. Well, then, Jim *was* bad; and I don't know if you call telling the truth abuse."

"Of the most virulent sort, on occasions. Are we not all sinners?"

"Speak for yourself, Mr. Humility."

Lionel, amazed by this self-canonisation, became less Aaron the priest and more Adam the natural man. "You don't call yourself immaculate, surely," he observed sarcastically.

"Did I?"

"By inference; and if no sinner, you must be saint."

"Ah! I see. Lamp-black or snow-white; grey does not exist. Parsons see the horizon, the doorstep, but no middle distance. Woman is Lucrece or Jezebel, with you. I am neither; but a simple woman, as God made me."

"And as the devil has marred."

"Foh! In this very room, when we spoke last, I scouted that bogie's existence."

"If you don't believe in evil existing, you can't in good. No devil, no God, Lady James."

"I never knew that the Deity depended upon Satan for his being," said Leah, dryly; "and theology doesn't amuse me--it's cobwebs and spindrift. Talk sense, if you must talk."

Lionel, hoping to lead her by a side-path to further consideration of her spiritual needs, consented to diverge for the moment. "I'll talk money, if you call that sense."

"Of course I do; uncommon sense, as there is so little of it. Money?" She looked at him questioningly.

"The insurance on your late husband's life."

"Oh! Well?" She wondered what he was about to say.

"The Duke asked me to interview the lawyers."

"Very unnecessary. I know all about the twenty thousand pounds. Jim left it to me, by will."

"You underestimate by ten thousand."

"What! Thirty thousand pounds?" Then, in answer to a nod, "Oh, you--you must be--be mistaken." Leah was truthfully agitated. Had the golden goose laid two eggs instead of one?

"No; your husband's life was insured, when he was a child, for twenty thousand pounds with profits, at an annual premium. Mr. Jarvey Peel and his executors paid the money to keep the insurance in force----"

"Yes, yes; and the principal was payable to Jim at sixty, or to any one he might leave it to at death, I, as the widow, take all--all--all;" she repeated the word three times, in the purring voice of a cat over cream.

"Exactly," assented the curate, thinking she betrayed over-plainly horse-leech parentage; "and the extra ten thousand is the accumulation of an annual bonus of fifteen pounds on every thousand."

"That's three hundred a year," calculated Lady Jim, feverishly.

"Quite so. Jim was thirty-five when he died. So three hundred a year for thirty-four years comes to ten thousand."

"Two hundred," supplemented Lady Jim, correcting his arithmetic. "Oh, Lord! Thirty thousand two hundred pounds, and Jim never knew that he was worth his weight in this gold."

"He never inquired, since the money would not come to him till he attained the age of sixty."

"It would have been almost double then," commented the lady, pensively. "What a pity Jim did not live till---- But no; we should have both been old then, and there would have been no fun. I am content with thirty thousand--really I am, Lionel. It doesn't do to be greedy."

"You are not," said the curate, ironically, "else you would have again mentioned the odd hundreds."

Leah made a ball out of the torn handkerchief and tossed it gaily in the air. "That will do for lawyers' costs," said she, airily, "though I hope the bill won't be so extortionate. Thirty thousand pounds!" She sprang up, with dithyrambic utterance, scarcely refraining from a war-dance. "Thirty thousand golden sovereigns! Six thousand lovely, lovely Bank of England notes! Oh, Vanderbilt! Oh----" The sight of her relative's disgusted face curbed her ecstasy: "You think that my exultation over this money is vulgar."

"Heartless, at least, since it is the price of your husband's death. To you, apparently, Jim is more valuable dead than alive."

"I entirely agree with you," confessed Leah, candidly; then added with impatient anger, "Do you expect me to tell you lies?"

"You might show some grief."

"Heavens! What else have I been doing for the past three weeks?"

"Assuming a virtue which you have not."

"That remark is too clever to be original, my dear man. How impossible you are! I wear mourning and cry at the right time, and say things I don't believe about Jim to his father and the rest of them; while to you, who blame me for behaving decently outside, I speak as I feel, only to be condemned. What do you expect?"

"To see you exhibit some real grief," said Lionel, who was really angered by her callous behaviour. "You show more genuine emotion over this miserable money than over poor Jim."

"Poor Jim," she mocked scornfully; "are you going to cry up his virtues?"

"He was not so bad as you make him out to be," retorted Lionel, doggedly.

"Then he must have revealed a side of his nature to you which he never showed to me," snapped Leah, sharply. "Foh! what's the use of acting to empty benches? Go downstairs if you want an audience. We are behind the scenes here."

"Very allegorical and needless. Can't you be more womanly?"

"If I were, the sal volatile you recommend would be needed, I can tell you. Being a parson you will not understand; being a man, you cannot. Womanly! womanly!--does that imply cant and shams? Am I to mourn with spurious lamentations that selfish profligate, who would have broken my heart had he ever possessed it? To be womanly is to excuse a man's faults, to lie down and be trodden upon, to condone unfaithfulness, and to be grateful for the shreds and patches of an egotistic life. Never! never!" Her lips twisted scornfully, her nostrils dilated, and she clenched her hands to restrain an outburst of that wrath which had consumed her during five years of holy matrimony. Lionel, astonished by her sudden transition from gay to grave, forbore interruption, and she declaimed her marital wrongs in a Boadicean vein. "I have read in that Bible of yours of the casting of pearls before swine. Jim was a Gadarene pig, who

would have rent me had I loved him, as I admit a wife should love her husband. My coldness, and what you consider my selfishness, was my sole safeguard against ruin and sorrow and outrage. You know that I speak the truth--I defy you to say otherwise. Jim! oh, Jim," she laughed unpleasantly; "Jim--that rag doll of his family, who is placed on a pedestal and worshipped, as though he were the golden idol he never was and never could be! I respect the Duke much more than I ever respected my husband, for he is genuinely blind to Jim's faults and mourns honestly. But you--you, who knew the man, and rebuked the man--oh, it would be amusing were it not so shameful."

Her bosom heaved as she hurled this speech at him, with gibe and jeer and ironic laughter. "I thank God that the man is out of my life," was her passionate cry. "Yes--I thank God."

"Did you believe in God you would not say that."

"Bah! Theology again."

"And truth."

"Which is not theology and never will be."

"That depends upon belief. The science which treats of God, and of man's duty to God, cannot be understood by you, who have neither hope nor faith."

"At least I have charity, the greatest of the three, which you lack."

"Give me an example."

"I credit you with honesty, while you cry me down as a bad woman."

"Pardon me. I do not say that you are bad. Misguided, rather."

"And why--according to your lights? Because I do not put up Jim as a pig-idol, to worship with crocodile tears?"

She silenced Kaimes for the moment, as there was much truth in her overstated contention. No decent woman could have loved or honoured the dead man; and this outspoken condemnation, provable in the main, was assuredly more honest than pretended laudation and sham sorrow would have been. Yet the merciless

indictment jarred on Lionel's sense of propriety, righteous as he knew it to be.

"The man is dead," said he, testily; "leave him to God."

Leah held her peace. It annoyed the ordinarily self-possessed woman, that for one fierce moment emotion should have overleaped judgment. Reining in her passions, she relapsed into the sober jog-trot necessary on the rutted road of conventionality. But Lionel's final speech provoked a laugh. Would his laudation of the dead, she wondered, change to criticism of the living, did he learn the truth? Feminine desire for the last word would have blurted out this final argument, but that an innate masculine discretion recommended silence. Therefore did she compromise with the laugh, which Lionel, misunderstanding, resented with the warmth of a generous nature.

"That is positively cruel," said he, indignantly.

"Very human, I think," said Lady Jim, yawning away the reaction.

Following his own line of thought, the curate did not traverse this statement. "A woman can make of a man what she pleases."

"Possibly; but I had a beast to deal with."

"Can't you think more kindly of him, now that he is gone?"

"No," said Leah, decisively. "I would not say so to every one, but I do to you, out of respect for your character."

"I am both flattered and grieved. Be lenient, Lady James. Are you so good yourself, that you can refuse charity to the dead?"

Leah shrugged her shoulders and crossed her feet. "That's a trifle personal, isn't it?" she asked good-humouredly; "like the rest of this futile conversation. Well, for the first time and the last, I shall pay you the compliment of defending myself. To begin with, my friend, your definition of good and bad depends upon dogma, so we disagree at the outset."

"Let us take the primary instincts of being, and----"

"Oh, I fear we have not the time to begin with Genesis. What is left of poor Jim arrives in charge of M. Demetrius within two hours, and I must prepare myself for the scene there is bound to be. To be brief in my defence, I can safely say that I am better than most women. I never gave Jim the chances he gave me of appearing in the divorce court. I keep my temper, even when most provoked. I don't say nasty things about those who run me down, and always help those I like. I avoid the use of slang and of excessively strong drink. I neither smoke, nor indulge in morphine. I invariably go to church, with half a crown for the plate; and--and--I think that includes all my virtues. What more would you have?"

"Unselfishness," responded Lionel, gravely; "egotism is your sin."

"And the world's. I might inquire with the Apostles, and I do inquire, with all curiosity, 'Who then can be saved?'"

"Those whose merits do not spring from the ego, as do yours. To you, Lady James, Satan comes in his favourite guise, as an angel of light, and only the Ithuriel spear of the Holy Spirit can unmask him. Virtuous! I grant you are--because you pamper self too much to sacrifice your position and comforts to a love that is willing to lose the world for love alone. Good-tempered!--why not, with a healthy body and an equable nature? That you do not gossip is certainly a point in your favour, although I suspect that this abstinence is again the ego, which does not permit you to be sufficiently interested in others to discuss their affairs. You help those you like--feed them, as it were, with the over-abundant crumbs from your table; in the words of our Lord I can say, 'Do not even the publicans so?' But would you help those you hate, and at a sacrifice?"

"Certainly not. Why should I? They would not be even grateful."

"Quite so. You expect a reward for your good deeds."

"In this world. You look for yours in the next."

"No; though I admit that the temptation is strong. I try to serve God out of love and gratitude."

"Ridiculous, even if true. Such self-abnegation is beyond me."

"Yes, that is what I call being really and truly good."

"I see--that is, I don't see. You are always so impossible."

"Nothing is impossible with God's help, as without it nothing is possible. Listen, Lady James;" and with his soul on fire to raise her from the material to the spiritual, Lionel attempted reasonable argument. For over half an hour did he preach, expound, warn, demonstrate, quote, deduce, persuade; but at the end of thirty-five rapid minutes he found her and himself again at the starting point.

Leah listened critically, and even with interest. Hindered by her limitations from seeing a satisfactory conclusion, she declined the tournament, and retired to watch her opponent tilt at giants which she mistook for windmills. Said the inversely deceived Donna Quixota: "How well you talk, Lionel! Why don't you leave the Church and go in for Parliament?"

The curate shook the cold water of this douche out of his ears, and rose, markedly discouraged. "I cannot make you understand," he said sadly; "only the Holy Spirit can convince you of your need."

"My need of what?"

"Of salvation."

"That would be adding sugar to honey, and I feel very contented with my honey. Good health, plenty of money, a tolerable position, and----"

"And you have yet to reckon with God. All these things come from Him, and all He can take away."

"I don't agree with you."

"Nor will you, until your pride is broken."

"That it never will be," said Leah, superbly.

"So you think in your insolence of beauty and health. But when you come to die?"

"Well, then, I shall die, and that's all about it."

"What is the glory of the rainbow to the colour-blind?" Lionel asked himself, and walked to the door. There he paused to deliver himself of a final warning: "Though you triumph in your own strength, and be at ease in the palace of sin, yet will the reckoning come. The Most High God--IS," and he departed.

"Word! words! words!" That was Lady Jim's summing up of the interview.

CHAPTER XXI

In that chilly hour preceding dawn, under the searching grey eye of earliest morning, the coffin was opened in the presence of Pentland and his family. The likeness between the lawful son and the unlawful, even more apparent in death than in life, startled the woman best prepared to countenance a gross deception. Leah could almost have imagined this waxen, awful face to be that of Jim; and an emotion of genuine fear shook her to the soul she had so deliberately burdened. Moreover, and not without reason, that haunting thought of an *assisted* death became appallingly obtrusive before these medicated remains. Was Demetrius--was she--guilty of----? Her will fought desperately against the suggested word, and this mental struggle still further compelled the revelation of elemental feelings. Streaming tears, trembling hands, furtive glances, testified to truthful terrors, breaking through calculated pretence. It needed a scornful look from Frith the sceptic, and an amazed stare on the part of Demetrius, to assure her that she beheld a corpse of no importance, save as a substitute for a living double. And even then this ironic inspection of the false seemed but a gruesome masquerade of Jim's lying in state, when his turn really came.

The actuality of her feelings afforded a welcome escape from further harrowings; and she left the room, clinging to the arm of Demetrius, careless whither he led her. The picture gallery was his goal, since its seclusion invited no eavesdroppers, and here he experimented with personally manufactured salts,

pungent and rousing. These, it soon appeared, were scarcely needed. Lady Jim, released from the necessity of playing a grim comedy, recovered speedily, and with recuperation came the disposition to flick away the disagreeable.

"What a fool I am!" said Leah, enraged to discover she was but mortal.

"A woman, a woman," murmured Demetrius, cynically complacent.

"But no heroine. Ugh!" she shivered, and huddled in her chair. "I shall dream of that thing for the next year. It was so like Jim. Ugh! ugh! Horrible! horrible!"

"Why should the sight of an empty house so startle you, madame?"

"I am in no mood for metaphors. Go away; you will be needed to shut that thing up."

"My successor the undertaker will do that. I have done my share."

"I only hope you have not overdone it," muttered the woman.

"And the meaning of that remark, madame?"

Leah wanting to know, yet, fearing to know, evaded an answer and shirked a question. "Leave me for a time," she entreated.

"No--if you will pardon my rudeness. We have much to talk about."

"Cannot you wait till after the funeral?" she said crossly. "It will look so strange, your remaining here with me."

"Ah, but no, madame. To those who might speak I am but your doctor, who has brought you here to recover yourself."

"I am perfectly recovered--perfectly."

"In that case we can talk," he insisted.

She yielded, not being yet her old fighting self after the soul-shaking. It was dangerous to enter upon a contest with flawed armour, so she temporised. It would be best, she decided, to hear his story, without committing herself to comments. Later, when her nerves were steady, she could answer more

cautiously the question he was about to ask at an inopportune moment. Her wary nature declined a consideration of marriage arrangements, to the extent of fixing a date for a ceremony in which she did not intend to take part. Still, he could plead, and she could, and would, procrastinate; therefore would the victory be with her when this unprepared interview ended.

"Talk on," she said languidly; then added, with a spite created by shattered nerves, "though I think it very disagreeable of you, to make me look on that horrid dead thing."

Demetrius was tolerant of feminine irrelevance. "Madame, to avert possible suspicion, it was necessary."

"Undoubtedly it was necessary," admitted self-contradicting woman. "But--what a risk!"

"Ah, pardon; in the dark, all cats are grey."

"I know nothing about cats, but the faces of the dead certainly vary, M. Demetrius. And dangers cannot be explained away by proverbs."

"In this case the danger has explained itself. We are now safe."

The plural struck disagreeably on Leah's ear, and reminded her somewhat pointedly of the readjusted relations between herself and the doctor. "*We* are now safe," she echoed, with reproving emphasis.

"Assuredly," responded Demetrius, wilfully blind. "Monseigneur has been completely deceived; also M. le Marquis and Madame his wife; while your tears, my dear friend, have washed away any possible doubts which, for my part, I do not believe existed."

Again she was faced by positive circumstances, for the Russian's last words hinted a sarcasm which annoyed her. It might be that, with still quivering nerves, she looked too anxiously for causes of offence, but the familiar ease of his manner was unpalatable. A second implied rebuke would avail as little as had the first, and Leah, mindful of her dignity, abstained from indicating in words the Rubicon he was not to cross. Demetrius knew overmuch for her to speak authoritatively, so it was necessary to permit him the odious intimacy of an accomplice. But he should pay hereafter for his usurpation of such a position:

that she vowed inwardly, even while smiling on his success. Smiling was possible now, as the prospect of an inevitable verbal duel braced her to abnormal self-control.

"Sit down," she commanded abruptly. "I have yet to learn details of your scheme."

"*Our* scheme," he reminded her.

"You flatter me, M. Demetrius, since I cannot take credit for your clever inventions."

"We are all in the same boat, madame."

"You, I, and----?" she glanced at him inquiringly.

"Your husband."

"Can you not grasp the fact that I am a widow? When I have a husband," she smiled meaningly, "do you think he will sanction Mr. Berring rowing in the boat you mention?"

Suspicious people are the easiest to gull, and the smile, rather than the words, changed the gloomy doubter into a confiding child. Her enforced diplomacy was gaining her ground already. "My angel! you mean----"

Leah cleverly shortened a possible rhapsody. "Of course I do. Ah!" with a sentimental sigh; "what have I done to be so doubted?"

"Never by me, I swear. Believe me, soul of my soul----"

"Hush!" she raised an admonitory finger to check dithyrambic wooings at an untoward moment. "We are yet in the wood."

"Out of it, while here--yes, here, where you so sweetly promised we should become one;" his voice sank tenderly.

"After certain preliminaries had been observed, M. Demetrius."

"Say, Constantine."

"As you will, Constantine. I can deny you few things, after what you have done."

"Yet what you deny is what I desire."

Lady Jim displayed impatience at this headlong haste. "We are not in Verona, nor will your age permit you to play Romeo to a Juliet of my temperament. When my husband's body is buried"--she laughed consciously--"and my months of mourning are ended, then--well, then--ah, be patient, Constantine."

"Am I not to touch your finger-tips meanwhile?"

"If it is any satisfaction;" and she gave him her hand to mumble, ruminating meanwhile on this shrinking of giant to dwarf. The unendurable lasted half a minute; then, "Be sensible, M. Demetrius."

"Ah!" the child sighed for his lost rattle; "you descend from poetry to prose."

She nodded. "Would you versify explanations?"

"Explanations?"

"Necessary ones. How did you transfer Garth's body to Jamaica?"

The doctor looked piteous. "To think of wasting this golden hour," he murmured.

"Oh!" The ejaculation was careless, but the instinct was to box a dullard's ears. "Business before pleasure, M. Demetrius."

"At least, Constantine."

"M. Demetrius," she repeated inflexibly. "We are to marry, well and good; but beforehand, I must understand my position as a Russian princess."

The pessimism of the Slav asserted itself in renewed doubts. "I am a simple doctor, madame."

"Very simple, if you imagine--but that can be discussed later. Come," cajolingly to a hesitating and sullen being, "an account of your adventures must prove amusing. Cheer me up for the funeral."

This extraordinary conclusion staggered a man not easily moved to amazement. "Mon Dieu!" Then in English: "You were weeping some minutes ago, madame."

"And I may be weeping some minutes later," she retorted, suppressing rising irritation. "I ask explanations rather than give them. Tell me how you managed."

Shrugging away a question relative to female weathercocks, Demetrius reluctantly obeyed. He desired love-talk, and she hard facts; but naturally her subject forced his subject out of sight. Man being romantic, and woman practical, the latter invariably clips the former's wings, lest he should soar beyond the necessities of her hour. Moreover, his pinions rendered useless, Demetrius could not dispute common-sense views. Thus, dexterously managed, did he yield to a puppet, Fate, the strings of which were pulled by obstinacy and selfishness, blended into what Leah called firmness. She was an adept at ticketing her vices virtues.

"That poor Garth"--the doctor mentioned his late patient thus endearingly throughout the narrative--"died of consumption."

"Of consumption?" Leah put the question she had been shirking for so long with nervous emphasis, and with short, indrawn breaths.

"Assuredly, and earlier than I expected. There was no need to----"

"I know--I know! Do not put it into words," she fiddled with her handkerchief, looking up, down, everywhere except at her companion. "Did he suffer much?" was her inquiring whisper.

"Not at all; he died in his sleep. Pray do not alarm yourself, madame; the release was a happy and an easy one."

"I am so glad--so relieved," murmured Lady Jim, seeing the spectre which had long haunted her pillow dissolve into thin air. "You see, I thought--that is, I fancied----" she hesitated, and passed her tongue over dry lips.

"The need did not arise," explained the doctor, answering somewhat contemptuously her unspoken fears; "although I was prepared to---- No, do not shudder; there is no blood on my hands, nor on yours. We can marry in peace."

The doubly false prophecy of the last sentence provoked her into ignoring the entire speech. "Go on--please go on. Garth died a natural death at Funchal. Well?"

"I did not say that, madame."

"Absurd! Why, your explanation----"

"Is yet to come, if you will accord me a hearing;" whereupon, accepting an impatient permission, Demetrius slipped into the undramatic--literally so, for he avoided oratorical snares, the high colouring of superlatives, and the temptation to dilate on obviously sensational moments. He might have been reciting the alphabet, so dry was his deliver of an advisedly barren tale.

One Richard Strange, mariner--so commenced the sober *Odyssey*--owned and captained a sea-gipsy, prowling on ocean highways and in harbour byways for the picking up of chance cargoes. As an instinctive buccaneer, ostensibly law-abiding, he lent himself and his tramp-steamer to whatever nefarious proposals promised the acquisition of money at slight risks. Thus fitted for the Russian's requirements, secret instructions brought him to anchor in Funchal Bay. With him sailed, for possible restoration to health, a consumptive nephew, Herne by name, also a factor in an admirably conceived scheme.

"The dead was necessary for the living, and the dead for the dead," said Demetrius, paradoxically.

"What do you mean by that?" questioned Lady Jim, very naturally.

"The body of that poor Garth had to be buried in Madeira, madame; yet, being wanted here, to pass as the corpse of your husband, it was necessary to arrange for a substitute."

"I understand. Herne was to pass as Garth, and Garth as Jim."

Demetrius assented and proceeded. With his two patients the doctor lodged at a second-rate hotel, not a stone's-throw from the shore. In due time Herne died, and Demetrius, at once transferring the body to Garth's bedroom, induced the surviving consumptive to board the *Stormy Petrel*,--so the sea-gipsy was named--for the purpose of informing its skipper of his relative's death. Strange, previously advised, detained the young man, and Demetrius proceeded to bury

Herne under the prisoner's name.

"An easier task than you would think, madame," he explained; "for the Portuguese landlord confused the names of my patients, owing to his ignorance of their language."

"But scarcely of their appearance, I should think," observed Lady Jim, shrewdly.

Demetrius shrugged away the objection. "I cannot say that the landlord had studied Lavater. To his uninformed eye, two fair young Englishmen were much alike; and consumption, madame, begets a family likeness in those it afflicts. I assure you that this Portuguese was as satisfied that my poor Garth had died, as is Monseigneur convinced that his son lies in the coffin we inspected."

Leah shuddered for the twentieth time at the mental picture evoked. "Ugh! What then?"

The doctor informed her placidly. As Garth, under a tombstone suitably inscribed, the skipper's nephew was buried--the very fact that he had existed thus being blotted out by a chiselled lie. Then did the sea-tramp loaf--the word is appropriate--over-seas to Jamaica at a slow ten knots an hour; with bad luck it would seem to one passenger, at least.

"He died on board," exclaimed the listener.

"That poor Garth--ah yes; as a child did he fall asleep, to waken----" Demetrius spread his hands, at a loss to supply further information. His ideas of a future state were vague.

With an admirably embalmed body on board, the disreputable craft of Captain Strange slipped her anchors in Kingston Harbour; but no half-masted ensign intimated her lugubrious cargo. Lord James Kaimes, forewarned by a cypher letter, rowed out to inspect an eidolon of himself, as he would one day appear. His nerves being shaken by enforced invalidism, he did not appreciate the sight. Also, the medicines of Demetrius, given to induce counterfeit consumption and lean, sallow looks, made him fear lest this rascally comedy should deepen into a real tragedy for himself. Those in Kingston with whom he had made acquaintance were not surprised when Demetrius took him eastward to the famous Blue Mountains, in the hope that the healing air would mend his lungs; nor did any one manifest astonishment when, after a discreet period, news came

of his death. Perhaps, if these sympathisers had seen one James Berring sneak on board the *Stormy Petrel*, and had beheld that ship rolling south to Buenos Ayres, they would have expended less pity on his untimely decease. As it was, while Jim foregathered with the skipper--a man after his own buccaneering heart--former acquaintances, Government officials, and local doctors were complimenting Demetrius on the clever way in which he had embalmed the late James Kaimes' body, with such few scientific appliances as could be at hand in the Blue Mountains.

"They had no suspicion--these people?" questioned Leah, abruptly.

"I assure you, no, madame. My mummy, you saw it, yourself."

Leah rose, lest her mind's eye should conceive too vivid a picture. "I shall always see it," she murmured, with loathing. "Ugh! What a fool I am--what a fool!"

"A woman, a woman. And so, madame, we recommence our conversation."

"It has already lasted too long," she rejoined. "Lord Frith----" Here she stopped, too discreet to repeat club gossip, which might strengthen still more the already strong position of Demetrius.

"You were about to observe, madame?"

"Nothing! It is of no moment. You are sure all is safe--sure?"

"As sure as I am that we, you and I, shall be happy."

"Sentiment and business mix about as well as snow and fire," snapped Leah, yet ridden by a nightmare memory of that dead face; "but this sailor whose nephew you borrowed?"

"Captain Strange? He will say what I will."

"At a price, no doubt."

"Of the smallest, madame. One thousand pounds."

"Ridiculous! Extortionate!"

"One cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs," said Demetrius, in dry tones; "it would be well not to vex my friend Strange."

"Who wants to vex him? He shall have his money. Anything else?"

"This letter from your late husband;" and Demetrius handed over an envelope directed in Jim's sprawling hand, and sealed with Jim's ancestral coat of arms.

"Fool!" was Leah's comment on this carelessness. "Doesn't he know he is dead, and is about to be buried?" She thrust the letter hastily into her pocket and was about to hurry away, when she caught a glimpse of the Russian's darkening face. She paused wisely, to dismiss him with a compliment. "You have managed splendidly, M. Demetrius."

"Do I not deserve to be called Constantine, now?"

"Yes--no--that is--oh, don't bother;" Lady Jim snatched away the hand he had captured. "You foreigners never learn sense."

"Are you teaching it to me now?" he asked in a metallic voice.

"I am--if you are clever enough to learn the lesson. See as little of me as possible, and don't speak to me at all. When Jim--that is, when Garth--is buried, we shall see."

"But, madame----"

"Quite so. Consider your objections answered."

"They will be answered," said Demetrius, very distinctly, "before the altar of any church you may select."

A remembrance of his capacity for being dangerous, and an anxious survey of his narrowing eyes, made her deceptive. She diplomatically employed feminine strategy, against which no man living can man[oe]uvre. "You doubt me, Constantine," whispered the she-Judas, with trembling tenderness; "will not this---?" She bent forward to drop a butterfly kiss on his forehead, and left him dazed, in the seventh and most exalted Paradise of Fools.

"Faugh!" said Lady Jim, when shut up in her own room. There she read the communication from her legally deceased husband. It narrated a story similar to that detailed by Demetrius, but scarcely so concisely. Mr. Berring showed a disposition to ramble, and his excursions ended on every occasion in a command to send half the insurance money at once--the last two words being aggressively underlined. He was in the best of health, on his way to Buenos Ayres; thence would travel to Rosario--"where that woman lives," commented Leah, tearing off the address and carefully burning Jim's maunderings. "Half the money--eh? Fifteen thousand pounds! I think not, Mr. Berring. That captain, too, with his absurd charge, and after all my trouble! I wonder Demetrius does not claim his share, also."

It would have been cheaper had he done so, since she possessed the money and he intended to possess her. But he would refuse a cheque and claim her hand, as she reflected with impotent rage. What a pity she could not pay him off, and, along with Jim and Strange, dismiss him into Limbo! She did not exactly know what Limbo was, or where it was, save that once there these people could not bother her. But with all the will in the world she could not get out of the apparent cul-de-sac she had walked into.

"Demetrius wants *me*, and these other beasts my money," she raged inwardly. "What a mean advantage they all take! Pigs! As though I worked for nothing. What is to be done? What--what?"

This question was difficult to answer. Jim she could bamboozle with a small sum, since he could not well betray her without laying himself open to a charge of conspiracy. But the Russian and the skipper, both adventurers of the most reckless type, would assuredly demand their wages. "I shall have to pay that captain," she decided regretfully; "but Demetrius--insolent little creature!--he shall go to Siberia, even if I have to kiss him again. Faugh!"

Then she descended to tell the Duke how the sight of poor dear Jim's face had broken her up entirely. Yet people said that Leah Kaimes had no sense of humour.

CHAPTER XXII

A sociable undertaker, lacking the indispensable humour of his brethren, bitterly complained that he rarely inquired after a friend's health without being suspected of business motives. Ex-lieutenant Harry Askew found himself in a similar predicament, since his desire to marry a widow precluded him from offering sympathy. That he should personally, or by letter, deplore the necessity of crape caps, would suggest waning affection; while a congratulatory address laid him open to the charge--which this especial widow would certainly make--of unseemly dancing on a newly-made grave. With laboured wisdom Askew dropped between the horns of this dilemma. Paying no visit, writing no letter, he compromised by leaving a card. In this dexterous avoidance of impalement Lady Jim read the untold story of his perplexity, and smiled at the diplomatic evasion.

There being an exception to every rule, the absence which should have made the Askew heart grow fonder produced an opposite effect. Debarred from the temple of his goddess, he began to ask himself why he worshipped, and thereby dug the grave of illicit passion. That such was now permissible, and even praiseworthy, considering its consolatory results, only made him a more ardent sexton. The votaries of Eros can begarland themselves with roses, but Hymen's celebrants wear chains of approved legal pattern. Was the cultus of the matrimonial god worth such encumbrances? Thus Askew inquired of his own pampered self, and, not knowing exactly what his selfishness desired, obtained but a doubtful response. What else could he expect? Two-faced Janus is the true god of oracles.

Lady Jim was witty, beautiful, chaste and brilliant--admirable qualities in a woman, but in a wife, unless informed with love, rather unattractive. Askew doubted if a composite mate of this glittering, unwarmed sort would satisfy his somewhat exacting requirements. Accepting too readily the world's definition, what he and it called love was actually selfishness, masquerading. He fancied, and with much reason, that Leah, openly devoted to herself, would not show devotion to him: that is, she being selfish, and he ditto, genuine happiness would not and could not spring from this union of like and like. Moreover, he ignorantly loved--in the world's sense--through his eyes, and with his lower

nature; so it was probable that the legal possession of irresponsible beauty would pall. To limit a butterfly to one rose would bore the butterfly, and if the rose were sentient, she also might feel weary. In this way, and from surface feelings, argued Askew; but natural limitations prevented comprehension of the true reason which disinclined him to prosecute his now legal and therefore uninteresting wooing.

He was a better man than he knew, and this he would have known, had he paid heed to the intimations of his higher self, when it occasionally overcame the lower. When the god within overtopped the brute, he had beheld not so clearly the body as the soul of Lola Fajardo, and had, for one swift moment, recognised that conjunction with the spirit would best promote his happiness. A genuine marriage must be spiritual, and it is the souls, whom God hath joined, which man is forbidden to put asunder. Askew's introspective self knew that his allotted wife on this physical plane was Lola, and that to her alone should love be given. But the lust of the eye demanded Leah Kaimes' beauty, and feigned a spurious passion to gain possession. Absence from Lady Jim made him aware that he did not actually love her, and a feeble struggle of the soul bound in chains of selfishness revealed that he would do well to seek Lola once more. Hence came the war between light and darkness, wherein the light so far triumphed that the young man sought Curzon Street with more self-control than was desirable in an admitted lover--one, be it known, of the worldly, material type only. And may all such, for the well-being of the race, be anathema maranatha!

"I took you to be more original," said Leah, when he entered.

"Original?"

"To the extent of defying conventionality by calling before the funeral."

"Your grief----"

"Needed consolation. You declined to console."

"I come now."

"At the eleventh and less necessary hour. Besides----" She looked meaningly towards the window-seat, where a flushed and smiling Katinka adored with timid conversation and eloquent eyes a rather sour Demetrius. "Will you have a cup of tea?"

"Thank you," and they moved towards the bamboo table, whence she had risen to whisper her greeting at the door.

Advisedly it would seem, since she cast a rapid and satisfied glance at the doctor's lowering face. The set mouth, the narrowing eyes, hard as jade, betokened jealous rebuke of Leah's condescending to meet the newcomer as royalty should be met. Reading this index of a mind ill at ease, Lady Jim resumed her seat, tacitly pleased. She had an end to gain, and this over-attention to Askew meant the beginning of plots.

It was over a month since the supposed Jim Kaines had been packed away in the family vault, and his widow enjoyed the fruits of her labours. Dr. Demetrius, looking upon the thirty thousand pounds as purchase money, wished to possess the woman he had thus bought, and objected to other customers eying his bargain. Hence his jealousy discerned a rival in Askew, and Lady Jim--aware of this clear-sightedness--was content that he should so discern. She could neither cajole nor reason Demetrius into trusting himself in Paris: but the desired result might be brought about by utilising green-eyed jealousy. The unexpected meeting of the rivals afforded her an eagerly seized chance of putting fire to powder. The possible explosion, she hoped, would blow Demetrius into Siberian wilds. Thus, playing with amorous fire, she hastened to heap on lavish fuel.

"I am seeing a few friends now," said Lady Jim, ministering to her visitors' five-o'clock wants. "Mademoiselle Aksakoff and Dr. Demetrius--you know both, I believe. Lady Richardson may look in later; also----" Here she checked her tongue. Aksakoff was due in half an hour; but it would not do to advise Demetrius of that. The chances were that Katinka, aware of the intended visit, would carry off the doctor early. Lady Jim devoutly wished that she would. Her drawing-room was no stage for melodrama.

"Also?" queried the newly arrived.

"Also her son, Sir Billy. Have you met him? Of course! Monte Carlo! I remember. Isn't he charming--a D'Orsay of the cradle, Brummel in embryo? I have a mind to marry him, as a pocket-husband."

"Am I to wish you joy?"

Leah looked at him suddenly and understood. This man had risen from his knees, and the chances were--going by experience--that he would stroll away.

She did not intend to permit that, since he was necessary to her schemes. Until Demetrius was safely bestowed in Siberia he would have to be flattered and coerced and ensnared into remaining. Then he could go and welcome. With freedom and money she wanted no encumbrances. And it vexes a woman to have a man more earnest than herself hanging round her skirts. However, this was not the time for plain speaking, and she answered in this Thalian vein.

"Of course you must wish me joy--in a whisper."

The smiles of Leah, the attitude of Askew, the sibilant indistinct voices of both, goaded Demetrius. He all but interrupted the tea-table conference. But since Lady Jim wished to be a princess--she had conveyed that idea clearly--and as Katinka's aid was necessary to the recovering of his birthright, he dared not to offend the girl. Jealous himself, Demetrius knew how easy it would be to arouse the doubts of another--especially of a woman. He therefore remained seated and waited developments, while Katinka chatted earnestly.

"I really wish you would be reconciled with my father," said she.

"M. Aksakoff is less willing for such a consummation than I, mademoiselle."

She disagreed, hurriedly. "You are wrong. My father is willing, but your enemies are not."

"And my enemies are his enemies?" he inquired dryly.

"Assuredly. But one enemy--Paul Petrovitch--is my friend."

"Your cousin."

Katinka nodded and proceeded with explanations. "He has, as you know, much influence with the Czar."

That would be used on your behalf, if----" She paused, coloured, and cast down her eyes.

"If what?"

"If I agreed to marry him."

Thin ice indeed, but Demetrius skated extremely well. "Mademoiselle," said he, gravely, "I cut myself off from my princely family, and surrendered wealth that I might work in the cause of humanity. To assist a brother worker did I risk exile, with the result you behold. Why, then, should I demand a sacrifice on your part, to restore that which I personally do not regret?"

"Believe me, my friend, it would mean no sacrifice. You hinted when last we met that you were prepared to consider the proposition of resuming your rank."

"I did--contingent on certain events happening," replied Demetrius, thinking that if Lady Jim insisted upon being a princess of the drawing-rooms, he would be forced to yield; "but we can talk of this in a--well, in a few months. There is no hurry!" recalling the necessary period of mourning. "No, there is no hurry!" He paused, then questioned suddenly, "You love Paul Petrovitch?"

"No, no! Ah, no!"

"It would, then, certainly be a sacrifice for you to marry him."

"I would never do that."

"How, then, could you persuade him to use his influence?"

"It is a case of diamond cut diamond," explained Katinka, with the indifference of a woman to all other honour, save that of the man she loves. "Paul Petrovitch wishes to marry me. If I agree, he will induce the Czar to reinstate you in your possessions. When you have made your peace at St. Petersburg, I could refuse to---- Oh!" she broke off with a confused laugh, "do not look shocked, M. Demetrius. I but trick him, as he is prepared to trick me."

"I am far from being shocked," denied the liberal-minded doctor; "to prevent being bitten, we must bite. But the possible sacrifice----"

"Lies in lending myself to such a trick. I make it for you--for you; yes, do you not understand?"

Only that stupid animal, a sheep, could have refused comprehension.

"I am not worthy," shuffled Demetrius, hurriedly.

"I think you are," she breathed tenderly. "Will you not permit me to prove my belief?"

"I shall be honoured, if--in a few months--the time is scarcely ripe for me to move; and you will understand. In short, when things are different--your noble offer--we can discuss it later. Believe me"--he thrilled her with a light touch--"I comprehend the nobility of your nature. Ah, my friend, do not press me to take advantage of so glorious a sacrifice."

So stammered Demetrius, his confusion being worse confounded, and wrapping up refusal in evasive words, meaningless if sugared. Katinka sighed. Always she pressed her mediatory offer, and always she declined acceptance. Angry that the proffered gift should be flung back in her face, she suddenly felt a sense of outrage at his persistent quibbling. This man must see that she loved him; yet he

trifled with her too obvious passion. There was Lady Jim, of course, in spite of Lady Jim's readjustment of the situation at Monte Carlo. Yet, could he, could any man, love this chilly, self-centered Englishwoman? No! As she knew, Demetrius demanded love for love, and he certainly would not give all to Lady Jim without receiving back in kind. Therefore he did not love the woman; therefore he was heart-whole; and being so, why should he not yield to one who was ready to suffer all for his sake? She could not understand; but this she knew--that her self-respect rebelled.

And at the moment, that feeling, swallowing up all others, impelled her to walk away, without even a backward glance. But she remained where she was, since her adoration for this unresponsive god amounted to monomania. She hated to cringe, to cast down her womanly dignity; but she was forced to do so. Passion proved stronger than self-respect, than natural shame, than maiden pride. Enthralled by Venus, as had been Helen of Troy, she was forced to grovel at the feet of this--as she suspected--ignoble Paris. Would he never smile? Would he never unbend? She could not say; she did not know. All she felt was pure unhappiness, and she could have cursed the power which trammelled her in these nets of undesired love. The gods were sporting, and Olympus shook with laughter at her mortal sorrow.

"Come--when you need me," said she, and rose.

Demetrius was self-seeking, yet possessed human feelings, and of these shame was uppermost. The vein of divinity which streaked his clay made him acknowledge that he was using hardly this flouted worshipper. Outwardly at least, and with an impetuosity alien to his calculating character, he wished to make amends.

"Let me come also."

"There is no need," she replied coldly, and crossed to the tea-table. "You will excuse my departure, Lady James. I have an engagement, Mr. Askew!" She bowed, and then went silently out of the room.

"Do you follow, doctor?" asked Lady Jim, stepping with him to the scarcely closed door.

He did not reply directly, but glanced across her shoulder towards the yawning lieutenant. "Remember," he breathed significantly, and in his turn departed.

Leah wondered that the feelings which had evoked the word should not have kept him watchful of her pretty play, and confessed herself puzzled by his abrupt following of Katinka's trail. But having, as she knew, aroused his jealousy, there was no need to consider meanings which would not affect her schemes.

Aksakoff was due, and before he appeared it was necessary to teach Askew the rôle of cat's-paw. He was to decoy Demetrius to Paris, but of course, she did not mean him to be aware of his ignoble duties. She returned to rebuke him for yawning and to propose a remedy.

"What you need is change of scene, if not of society. Now there is Paris, which you probably know well."

"I do not know it at all," he confessed.

"What a neglected education! I must teach you Paris. Will you be ready for your first lesson early next week?"

"I do not quite understand."

Lady Jim nodded laughingly. "Which proves that 'our future' is now split into 'your future' and 'my future.'"

"I am more in the dark than ever," said the amazed listener.

Lady Jim curled her lip contemptuously. "You men need so much explanation," said she; then, meaningly, "I can still retain you as a friend, I hope."

"What do you--that is--on what grounds----? You do not comprehend!" He stuttered, grew red, and writhed over the fire on which she was grilling him, with much enjoyment to herself.

"Ah, but I do comprehend--very clearly, too. When did the change come?"

"The--change?"

"Of heart, if you wish me to enter into details."

"There is no change in me," he denied, still red and flurried.

"And no truth either, when you make such a statement!" With a light laugh she recalled his fierce wooing: "you would not attempt to break my wrists now."

"I am very, very sorry, that I was rough with you."

"Quite so, and cannot you see that such sorrow explains everything?"

"Not to me," said Askew, desperately fervent.

Leah clapped her hands gaily. "How very badly you do it! Do not go on the stage, I beg of you. Well!" she kissed her hand to him, "adieu! I hope she will be happy."

"Who will be happy?"

"The other woman."

"There is no----" He caught her derisive eyes, and broke down with an uneasy laugh. "I suppose we have made a mistake."

"*You* have," she replied, promptly emphasising the pronoun.

"Ah!" His pride was wounded by the implied indifference. "Then you knew it would come to this?"

"Of course, because I did not choose that it should end otherwise. If I had chosen, you would still have been----" She glanced smilingly at her slim feet, then handled the teapot with ostentatious liveliness. "You can have some cold tea, if you like."

As Askew had intended to drop her, the idea that she was dropping him--and very readily, too--was wounding to his vanity. "You never loved me," he declared.

"Did I ever say that I did?"

"Well, no; all the same----"

She clasped her hands over her knee, and smiled indulgently at his mortified face. "All the same, you are unwise to explain, so we will change the subject,

Mr. Askew."

"Ah! Not even Harry?"

"Not even Leah," she mocked. "Still, you can call me Lady Jim."

"Till you change the name."

"Certainly not for that of Askew. Señorita Fajardo may think differently, when you propose."

"How do you know I shall?" he asked sulkily, for every word she uttered fretted his uneasy vanity.

"Because you are a shuttle-cock between two battledores. She sent you flying to me; I shall speed you back to her."

The young man was almost too mortified to speak. "What a light, vain fool you make me out to be!"

"No. You are merely a man in the hands of two women--clay in the hands of accomplished potters. Now," she laid a caressing hand on his arm, "promise me to go back to Rosario at once."

"No!" snapped Askew, wincing at the touch, and so gave her the very answer she required.

Her motive in pelting him with hard sentences had been to arouse his vanity to assert itself in aggressive contradiction; and for three reasons. Firstly, she did not wish him to make an inconvenient third in Mr. Berring's wooing of the Spanish lady, lest he should learn much that it was undesirable for him to know. Secondly, she required him as her Parisian decoy-duck. And thirdly, it was out of the question that he should dare to end the flirtation without her leave. A reflection of these things led her to play skilfully on manly conceit, with the aforesaid result. She was satisfied when he replied in the negative. Askew also, since thereby, in his own estimation, he had vindicated virility, and lacked the insight to see himself her puppet. Having gained her end, Lady Jim apparently yielded to the lord-of-creation fiat.

"Well, then, come to Paris with me and Joan Tallentire. We go on Monday to the Hotel Henri Trois, Champs Élysées. You can come on Wednesday."

"But I don't think----"

"I am quite sure you don't. Perhaps Thursday will suit you better."

"If you insist."

"I do not, unless on common sense, of which you possess so little."

"How you bully me!" he cried, much vexed by this badgering.

"Of course; we always bully those we love--as friends, that is. Ah, here is M. Aksakoff. What a surprise!" She rose gracefully and sailed forward with outstretched hand, "So kind of you to come! You know Mr. Askew, I think."

The diplomatist bowed, and seated himself near the table, whereat Askew, devoured by a desire for further confidences, fumed, with depressed eyebrows and twisted mouth. Lady Jim rang for fresh tea, listening meanwhile to Aksakoff discussing the safe subject of the weather. Occasionally she glanced with amusement at her victim, who by this time did not know his own mind, and certainly was incapable of analysing his very complicated feelings. She bewildered him; he was not master of himself in her presence, and alternately quailed and rebelled under her spells. Flight from Circe was his wisest plan.

"Must you?" inquired Lady Jim, winningly, at the first movement.

"Must what, please," he asked sulkily, settling down again.

"Must you go? I see you must. So sorry. Good-bye."

"I do not want to----"

"To be bored. Naturally; a widow is but dull company. Please do not leave us in the dark. The button is on the right-hand side of the door. No; that is wrong!" She rose and switched on the light herself. "That is better! Don't you think it is? So good of you to come and cheer me!" Then, dropping her voice, "Paris?"

"I shall cross on Wednesday," he murmured; "then we can resume our conversation."

"What pleasure you promise me!" she retorted; and, closing the door, came back to the waiting diplomatist, yawning daintily. "Excuse me, M. Aksakoff: I have just ended a bad quarter of an hour."

"That young man, madame?"

"The same. He wants to marry me. Shocking, isn't it, seeing that I scarcely know how to pose as a widow?"

"But natural on his part, surely."

"How nicely you pay compliments! By the way," sliding away from the subject, "your daughter was here. She has gone off somewhere with your friend, M. Demetrius."

Aksakoff frowned. "It is kind of you to enlarge my circle of acquaintance, madame. I presume you desire to speak of this gentleman?"

Leah raised her eyebrows. "No; why should I?"

"Our conversation at Monte Carlo----"

"Did we converse? So we did! Something about a sunset, wasn't it?"

The diplomatist became unworthy of the name, through sheer irritation. "Can we not drop our masks, madame?"

"I never knew that we wore such things," said Lady Jim, lightly. "I am sure I do not. Why should I?"

"But you sent for me."

Leah placed her elbows on the table, and the tips of her fingers together. "I did, to ask you for some letters to nice people in Paris."

"Ah!" His face lighted up. "You go to Paris?"

"My good friend, have I not said so? And the letters?"

"I shall be delighted;" Aksakoff was now beginning to understand the necessity of reading between the remarks. "But are letters necessary? I hope to be in Paris myself next week."

"How delightful! You will be able to amuse me. Do not look shocked. I assure you I only wish to drown my grief."

"Of course," assented Aksakoff, dryly; then added, with a significance she ignored: "Do you go alone to Paris?"

"Oh, dear me, no. Miss Tallentire goes with me. A charming girl who is engaged to my cousin, the Rev. Lionel Kaimes. We stay for a week at the Hotel Henri Trois, Champs Élysées. Very quietly, you know, as I am still mourning."

"As you are still in mourning," corrected her visitor, politely.

"Certainly. You would not have me flaunting colours with poor dear Jim just dead. I want to be cheered up, and I ask you and Mr. Askew to cheer me."

"Oh! ah!" Aksakoff wrinkled his brow. "Mr. Askew goes to Paris, also?"

"He said something about it. Such a nuisance, seeing that he thinks--well, I told you."

"Madame, his thoughts are excusable. But M. Demetrius will be angered."

"What do you mean?" demanded Lady Jim, imperiously.

Aksakoff's patience was almost exhausted. "We spoke at Monte Carlo," he reminded her. "Surely we understand one another."

"Possibly you may. I am quite in the dark. Why should you couple my name with that of M. Demetrius?"

"Report says that he loves you."

"Oh--report!" She laughed, frankly amused. "If you believe reports----" Here a shrug and a contemptuous laugh. "Why, reports leave no one a shred of character. I quite expect that my enemies--Mrs. Penworthy, for one--will say that Mr. Askew followed me to Paris, for the purpose of marrying me at the British

Embassy."

Aksakoff admired her profoundly. Without committing herself in any way or for a single instance, she was placing in his hands the thread of the intrigue. Tacitly acknowledging a diplomatic superior, he followed her lead. "I trust that Mrs. Penworthy, whom I have the honour to know, will not spread such a report," he said gravely.

"Oh, but she will. A horrid woman, and scarcely respectable. She has called in Dr. Demetrius as her medical attendant, and if--as you say--he admires me, she is sure to make mischief."

"Well," said Aksakoff, reflectively, "I am perfectly sure that if M. Demetrius heard such gossip, he would----"

"Forbid the banns," finished Leah, hastily and derisively. "Pah! Do you think, knowing his danger, he would trust himself in Paris? You are entirely wrong, M. Aksakoff. Our mutual friend left me this very afternoon to follow your daughter. Let him marry her--now do."

"No," said Aksakoff, setting down his cup. "Until he surrenders Katinka he is safer in England."

"In that case, please do not let Mrs. Penworthy gossip him into crossing the Channel."

"For your sake, I will not," said Aksakoff, dryly, and with every intention of aiding and abetting Mrs. Penworthy. "Will you give me another cup of tea?"

She supplied him, and their conversation embraced a variety of subjects. No further mention was made of Demetrius, or of Katinka, or of Askew, or even of Paris. They quite understood one another, did these two clever people. When the diplomatist departed he kissed Lady Jim's hand with courtly warmth.

"You are a charming woman, madame--a truly admirable woman; but"--he straightened himself, and looked into her eyes--"I should not like to have you for an enemy."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Lady Jim, artlessly.

"A compliment, madame--believe me, a very high compliment."

CHAPTER XXIII

"Oh, it's lovely, lovely, lovely!" sang Joan Tallentire, clapping her hands, and whirling dervish-fashion around the room.

A radiant day or so in Paris had acted on her as sunshine acts on a flower, when the petals expand, the colour deepens, and the perfume exhales. What observer, casual or close, would have recognised in this eager-eyed and sparkling girl the timid companion of Lady Canvey? For weeks she had associated with the octogenarian; many months had she superintended the well-being of pauper hags in Lambeth slums; and in the nursing of an ailing mother many precious years had been expended. No wonder the fire of being burnt low; no marvel that for long the eyes had lacked lustre and the cheeks colour. It was truly a case of the old eating the young--stealing by contact, as it were, the vitality of youth to reanimate waning life.

Now Lady Jim, playing fairy-godmother, had transformed this Cinderella, and the grub of Lambeth soared a splendid dragon-fly. The spring, long delayed in its coming, sang in her veins. With stimulating company, amidst novel surroundings, and with tempting food for satisfying physical and moral appetites, came the renascent period. Joan felt the burden of artificial years slip from her shoulders; her quick blood, responding to its environments, rose to fever heat. One cloud alone necked the sunshine of pleasure's dawn.

"I wish Lionel was here," she sighed.

"A Pagan in the temple, a Jew in the church," said Lady Jim, shrugging. "My dear, Paris was invented for clergymen to rail at, not to enjoy."

"Lionel is not narrow-minded, Lady James. He approves of innocent amusements."

"Magic-lanterns and penny readings. I fear Paris cannot supply those dissipations. You can enjoy them under the honeymoon. Meanwhile Mr. Askew is less exacting and more amusing."

"There is no one like Lionel--no one."

"I grant that, else would the world be innocent and dull."

Joan pursed up her pretty lips and wrinkled a smooth brow. "I don't understand that," said she, meditatively.

"No," assented Leah, with a slow and somewhat envious look; "you never will."

"Why not?"

"I could give you fifty reasons, but three will do. You are good and kind and healthy-minded to excess--an angel, whose white wings flutter above the mire in which we bipeds grovel. Quite the wife for our unsophisticated padre. St. Sebastian and St. Cecilia--surely a marriage arranged in heaven."

Miss Tallentire could not quite follow Leah's flights--not an infrequent occurrence. Nevertheless, her intuition espied a compliment.

"Do you really mean that?"

"As I rarely mean anything. Let me be candid for once, since we converse in the nursery, and say that I respect Lionel and I respect you."

"I would rather have love," suggested the girl, timidly.

Leah touched her breast with eight finger-tips. "From----" Then in response to an answering blush: "My dear, I love no one but myself."

"I can't believe that, or you would not have bothered to bring me to Paris."

"Merely the desire for a new sensation. I assure you, as Lionel assured me, that all my virtues spring from the Ego."

"What is the Ego?"

"Leah Kaimes in this instance."

"I don't think you are selfish," persisted Joan; "if you really and truly were, you would not say so."

"Oh, but I should; that is my refined form of self-love. When I cry aloud my imperfections, I receive some such compliment as you have paid. Then little god Ego, sitting within my breast, sniffs up the incense."

"In that case I am selfish, too. I like to be told nice things."

"And to be given nice things, such as---- Well, I expect Lionel, in spite of clerical propriety, can explain better than I, and," added Lady Jim, mischievously, "in dumb show. My dear, your Ego is shaped like a good young padre; you are merged in Lionel--swallowed up, as some one's rod swallowed up some one else's. I suppose now"--Leah nursed her knees with clasped hands--"I suppose when you marry St. Sebastian, you will be wildly happy in a dull country rectory, wearing twice-turned gowns and last year's hats, and fussing after old women and grubby village urchins, with your husband's sermons for relaxation when penny readings pall."

"Quite happy," assented Joan, laughing at the over-coloured picture--"with Lionel, of course."

"As I say: your Ego is his Ego. Dear!" and Lady Jim dropped two impulsive kisses on her companion's cheeks. Joan wondered at this uninvited display of affection, and wondered still more when Leah turned away with a somewhat bitter laugh. Perhaps, had she guessed the truth, her sympathy would have extended to this woman, whom self-love isolated from humanity.

It pleased Leah to pose as this simple maid's providence, and on the whole she sustained her deity excellently. Many a time did she check her free-spoken and sharp tongue, lest Joan should feel hurt, or become precociously enlightened about those sins which are dubbed idiosyncrasies in society. The amusements provided were primitive and commonplace, as befitted the retirement of a newly made widow and uncultured *débutante* tastes. Drives in the Bois; visits to the Louvre, to Versailles, to Notre Dame--on the tail of Hugo's romance--to Père Lachaise; many inspections of many delightful shops, one concert at least, and

the exploration of places which had to do with the picturesque history of France filtered through Baedeker and Murray. Leah, unused to bread and milk, thought the majority of these outings insipid; but Joan enjoyed them immensely, and wondered at Continental dissipation. Her ignorance credited Leah with loving, and invariably leading, this Cook's-tourist life when abroad; and that lady laughed frequently, in the seclusion of her bedroom, at the idea of being limited to nursery geography. Nevertheless, she did not undeceive her *ingénue*; the bloom, if she could prevent it, should not be brushed too early from this peach. Which reticence and determination showed that Lady Jim had in her some soul of that goodness which lives in things evil.

Askew duly arrived forty-eight hours later, so that his meeting with Leah might appear unexpected. He called daily at the Hotel Henri Trois, and on a hint from Lady Jim devoted attention to Joan the maid. Leah herself philandered in a business-like way with M. Aksakoff, who, strange to say, followed Askew's trail on important business. Lady Jim enjoyed many interesting conversations with him, dealing with a quiet obliteration of Demetrius, if he should by any chance walk into the trap. Joan and her cavalier, good surface readers, did not guess at the elements working below, and so danced unsuspectingly on a volcano. The fickle sailor was now lukewarm in his affections, and, as Leah purposed dropping him gradually as soon as Demetrius was on his way to Siberia, she was not ill pleased to watch red-hot passion cool to ashen-grey friendship. Certainly it still remained to withhold him from seeking a foreign wife over-seas, but she postponed schemes of prevention pending the disposal of immediate troubles. Sometimes it occurred to her that Askew, a man of tow like all sailors, might catch fire from contact with Joan; but, player as she was with the hearts and brains of men, she cherished sufficient friendship for Lionel to forgo a possible spoiling of his sober romance. There was little danger that Miss Tallentire would exchange Church for Navy, but that the juxtaposition of an artless maid and an inflammable bachelor might not breed fickleness, Lady Jim wrote a letter. "Why not come over and escort us back to town?" ran this epistle. "Also, in Paris you will assuredly find material for a sermon on the wickedness of that great city Nineveh,--I believe you parsons give Western towns Eastern names, when you wish to abuse them--to avoid libel actions, maybe." Then followed the mention of the rope to drag this clerical lover across Channel. "Do come, if only to see how Joan enjoys the society of Mr. Askew."

The expected happened on the fifth day of Lady Jim's sojourn in Paris, when, shortly after noon, Demetrius, obviously disordered in dress and mind, presented

himself in the character of a bolt from the blue. Luckily, Askew was translating to Joan the Luxor hieroglyphics in the vicinity of the Place de la Concorde Obelisk, so that she had an hour to explain away the rumours which had undoubtedly brought him over. When the sitting-room door clicked behind him--he facing her with black looks--she drew a deep breath to brace for the fight, and heard, what he did not, the snick of prison bolts shot home. So far, lured by the will-o'-the-wisp, jealousy, he had followed recklessly the dangerous path; now it remained for her to conduct him to the precipice, over which she and Aksakoff intended he should be thrown. A trifle of acting was necessary to reassure the venturesome and perhaps suspicious traveller.

"M. Demetrius! Are you mad?"

"Not Constantine, then." He panted like a spent runner, and his face twisted in a wry smile.

"What do you mean?"

Demetrius dropped heavily into the nearest chair, and sent angry, inquiring glances into every corner. "Where is he?"

"Where is who?"

"Oh, madame"--he became sarcastic here--"you know very well, I think."

"I know nothing, save that you are foolish to venture into Paris, where there is a price on your head. M. Aksakoff is here, too; if he knew--if he guessed."

"Well, what matter? I have run greater risks for lesser reasons."

"Yet they must be strong ones in the present instance, to make you enter the bear's den."

"I have one reason for my venture, madame--you; and another--Mr. Askew; not to speak of a third--this marriage at your Embassy."

"I can understand the first; the second may be explained by wholly unnecessary jealousy; but the final one--this marriage you speak of?"

"Between yourself and Mr. Askew."

Lady Jim stared, then laughed good-humouredly. "My dear Constantine, the idea is too ridiculous."

"I have the news on good authority."

"Which is the last authority you should believe. Mr. Askew is certainly here; but not, I believe, in the character of a bridegroom."

"Mrs. Penworthy"

"Oh!" Leah's scorn was worthy of the great Sarah. "Mrs.--Penworthy?"

"She told me that you came here; that Mr. Askew followed----"

"Forty-eight hours later. Quite correct."

"And that you intended to marry him at the British Embassy."

"Really! I never knew that Mrs. Penworthy was imaginative."

"It is not true!" His eye probed her.

She did not flinch. "You must be mad to think so."

"It is not true?" he persisted.

"You yourself have denied the truth of it twice. Mr. Askew at this moment dances round Miss Tallentire's skirts. Would I permit that, if----? Oh, ridiculous! You men swallow camels."

Her dupe rose to pace the room, and to pour out the anger of many brooding hours. "It is not true--ah, if I could only be sure of that. This woman--this Mrs. Penworthy--she swore--swore--that you--that you----" He choked, flung himself headlong to where she smiled contemptuous, and seized her hands vehemently. "Swear that it is false!" He dropped on his knees, almost tearful.

"I do swear," rejoined Leah, disengaging her wrists. "You can take Mr. Askew back to London if you like. He is engaged to marry a lady in South America. There is nothing between us--nothing. A flirtation, yes; banter and pretty smiles, idle nothings and surface conversations." She smoothed back his hair and smiled

playfully. "Am I marrying Othello?"

"You are so beautiful," he muttered, wavering.

"In your eyes, no doubt. Mr. Askew prefers brunettes south of the Equator. But!"--she rose suddenly, as though she spurned him--but "I prefer trust. I am angry--yes, very angry. Oh, that you should doubt me--doubt me!" Her tragic assertion was admirable.

"I do not--I do not;" and he still grovelled, catching at her dress.

"Your presence here proves otherwise. Mr. Askew, indeed--a general lover, a volatile sailor with a wife in every port for all I know. Can you not credit me with more exclusive tastes?"

"He is handsome," muttered the still suspicious doctor, and rose, brushing his knees mechanically.

"Is he? So you think I am to be won by looks, like a schoolmiss in her teens;" she looked at his sharp white face, and laughed cruelly. "That I am engaged to you should prove differently."

He scarcely heeded her. "Swear! Swear!" and his eyes flamed.

Leah, calculating the effect, lost her temper. "I shall in a moment," she cried angrily. "The most patient of women--of whom I am not one--have their limits. Why do you allow jealousy to overrule common sense, when the position is so plain? You fixed your price and fulfilled your part of the bargain. Am I, I ask you, free to play you this trick of a hasty marriage, when you can expose me as privy to a fraud? You see that I do not mince matters; I speak plainly, do I not? You have all the winning cards, and can compel me to become your wife, even if I dissented. Why, then, do you come here on a fool's errand?"

"But I love you so," he protested piteously.

"And love, being blind, makes you stumble into danger. I think you had better return to England by the night train."

"Am I to leave you with Mr. Askew?"

"Oh, take him with you; I gave you permission before. And pray don't make scenes--I dislike them."

"Then I am wrong?"

"Faugh! If you doubt my word, perhaps you will take Mr. Askew's. He will be here soon with Miss Tallentire. I decline to defend a position which requires no defence."

A shrug ended this speech, and this, in conjunction with the anger brightening her hard blue eyes, reduced him to profuse apologies.

"But indeed, my soul, you should not be enraged; that I should risk what I do risk surely proves my love for you."

"You have proved it before by getting me the insurance money," she replied impatiently; "pray return at once. I can see you in Curzon Street when I return on Tuesday."

"Then you promise to marry me."

"Yes!" Leah heaved a sigh of exhaustion. "How often do you wish me to say so? Even if you remain Dr. Demetrius I am bound to become your wife, seeing that you hold my reputation in your hands. Though of course," she added sweetly, "I expect to be Princess Constantine Demetrius."

"I am willing--believe me, I am willing," he stuttered, now quite positive that Mrs. Penworthy was a liar of the worst. "Aksakoff----"

"What of him?"

"Did you not say that he would aid me to regain my position, if I gave up Katinka?"

"He said something like that," she rejoined carelessly, and wondering why at this moment he recalled the proposition. "But I rather fancy his offer was merely to leave you alone."

Demetrius looked silently at the carpet. Leah watched him with a doubtful look, on her guard against complications. He looked up suddenly, and with rather a

shamed face. "Certainly I could secure the services of Mademoiselle Aksakoff," he murmured; "but it seems cruel to use her influence and then to leave her. She loves me. Ah, yes, she loves me very truly, and I--I treat her most badly."

"If you think so, why not make amends and marry her?"

"Because I love you, and at great risk I have bought you." He glared at her savagely. "I refuse to let you go; you are mine--mine."

"I never denied that," said Lady Jim, dryly; "but I really cannot accompany you to Siberia, and if you remain here----"

"Wait!" He flung up an imperative hand. "I shall see Aksakoff."

This sounded almost too good to be true, and Leah doubted. "No!"

"Yes. Ah, my adored, I know how you feel for my safety;" his voice took on a caressing tone. "But--it is nothing;" he brushed away imaginary danger with a rapid gesture. "I shall see him. I shall plainly surrender Katinka, and then--then, when he knows that we--you and I--are to marry, he will interest himself with the Czar, on our--you mark me, my angel--on our behalf."

"It's a mad idea, impracticable. You dare not trust Aksakoff."

"Ah, bah! He will not arrest me publicly--he cannot. The scandal--the diplomatic storm--the newspapers. No, no!--it is too absurd. Besides"--he shrugged--"this tender father will repay me if I give his daughter to understand that we can never marry. He desires her to be the Countess Paul Petrovitch."

"Hum!" said Lady Jim, rejoicing that the prisoner judiciously saw to the closing of the door, before turning to meet Aksakoff's inquiring gaze. "You approve of a full table, madame?"

"There is safety in numbers," she assured him.

"For M. Demetrius?"

Leah resumed her seat with raised eyebrows. "I fear you will think me dull, M. Aksakoff, but I do not understand."

The diplomatist bowed an apology. He had forgotten that even in private her comedy was to be played by the book. The conversation of the next few minutes he foresaw very plainly. She would play round the reason for their meeting, without coming to grips, mysteriously conveying her meaning in speeches which she did not mean. Only a politician of Aksakoff's subtlety would have understood the unsaid from what she now proceeded to say.

"Besides"--she was continuing the speech interrupted by his bow--"you promised that no harm should come to the doctor."

"Madame, I renew that promise."

"I hope so; otherwise, I shall regret having consented to this meeting."

"Yet I understood that M. Demetrius desired it."

"That is no reason why I should consent."

"Possibly not. Still, as a peacemaker----"

"You put me into the Beatitudes, then?"

"Why not, if you achieve your object in reconciling enemies?"

"The signing of the treaty depends upon you, M. Aksakoff."

"Consider it signed--on conditions."

"Which means that it is not signed. H'm! M. Demetrius is anxious, even willing, to renounce your daughter."

A dull red stained Aksakoff's opaque skin. "How flattering to my fatherly pride! There is, then"--the hint was delicate--"another?"

Lady Jim retorted in kind. "So you said at Monte Carlo."

"Mademoiselle Ninette? I believe I did. She lured him to Paris, then?"

"How should I know? He has never mentioned the creature's name to me, nor would he dare to. He came, so he declares, to see me."

"On matters connected with your recent loss, no doubt."

"It is more than probable."

Her avoidance of the necessary topic exasperated him. Sharp words were on the tip of his tongue, but wisdom withheld them. His accomplice was not the woman to yield to dominance, and the merest hint of its exercise might, probably would, engender wrath likely to jeopardise the almost achieved plot. Money or no money--Aksakoff still ascribed mercenary reasons--her pride would never bend to the yoke of advice. To be silent was his second thought, and silent he became. This, it would seem, was wise, since she began to explain, Aksakoff paying out liberally the necessary rope that she might hang herself.

"M. Demetrius is unwise to come here. I told him so; yes, I confess--remember my warning--that I betrayed you. All the same--very foolishly, I think--he insisted upon an immediate meeting, to recover his birthright, he says. Can you arrange for the rehabilitation, of this exiled Esau?"

A faint smile played round the diplomatist's thin lips, "I can!"

"And you will?"

"Assuredly, if M. Demetrius disabuses Katinka of her infatuation."

"That is his affair and yours. No doubt"--she spoke meaningly--"you will wish to speak to him privately?"

"There is no need, madame, seeing that you are in his confidence, and in mine. Besides"--very slowly--"we can converse over our tea."

Lady Jim's nerves jumped. "Over tea," she echoed equally slowly--"tea, after luncheon?"

"It is a Russian custom. M. Demetrius and I are Russians. Still, if the suggestion appears presumptuous"--he waved his hand with assumed deprecation--"I withdraw it and apologise."

"No!" She passed her tongue over dry, white lips, and answered faintly. "You shall have your--tea." Then, rising hurriedly, she made for the near window on an obvious excuse. "I do not see him coming."

As plainly as though Aksakoff had put it into words did Lady Jim know that he intended to drug their victim. What would occur if this plotter succeeded she did not know; what might occur she shivered to think of, and the thought made her rash. "The police!" she murmured, turning from the window.

M. Aksakoff joined her, adjusting his pince-nez leisurely, and proceeded to look up and down the street, two stories below. "I do not see the police, madame. But what a delightful day! I trust the night will be equally mild, since I journey to Havre."

"You go to Havre--to-night?" breathed Leah, not yet herself.

"By a moderately late train. My cousin, Count Petrovitch, is there with his yacht. We have to talk about his possible marriage with my daughter, before he leaves to-morrow for Kronstadt."

"Oh!" sighed Lady Jim, very white. "How--how--amusing!" and after misusing the word, she went back to her chair with geographical thoughts. Paris--Havre--Kronstadt--Siberia; and Demetrius. "Oh!" sighed she again, with a trembling hand shielding her eyes.

"You are ailing, madame," cried Aksakoff, hastening to her politely.

"Starving!" replied Leah, with a wry smile. "Hush!"

The warning hissed through the chatter of Joan and Askew, who entered, almost riotously happy. Their exuberant manners and frank speech brought a wholesome breeze of cleansing honesty into the atmosphere of stale rascality. The bracing wind blew Lady Jim out of dark chambers into the day-lit spaces of the commonplace. With the protean capability of women she flashed as a sun from passing storm-clouds, to shine on the honest and hungry.

"Thanks awfully for your invitation to luncheon," said Askew.

"Which you forgot."

"Did I ever receive it?" he asked doubtfully.

"Did not my last remark imply the invitation. Remarkable!"

So irrelevant sounded the last word that Aksakoff queried its reason.

"Not that a man should forget an invitation," she explained; "but that a single meal should escape his greedy memory."

"You make me out to be a gourmet," hinted the invited guest.

"Why not a gourmand? One speaks French in Paris."

"Not invariably, since we now converse in English," said Askew, dryly; and she approved of the retort. Clearly he was rapidly recovering from the green-sickness of crude passion.

Meantime Joan instructed Aksakoff in ancient history. "The hieroglyphics on the Place de la Concorde Obelisk describe the triumphs of Rameses II., who reigned over Egypt in the fourteenth century before Christ. Mr. Askew knows him."

"Indeed?" smiled Lady Jim. "Is he stopping in Paris?"

"Miss Tallentire means to say that I know 'of him.'"

"Well, I said so. But my English *is* faulty."

"Mr. Askew will surely improve it. His knowledge of hieroglyphics----"

"The guide-book's knowledge, Lady James," corrected Askew.

"Hum! Information while you wait--Murray and Baedeker's extract of history--archeological tabloids."

"What felicitous phrases!"

"Sarcasm! That surely means--convalescence."

"You have been ill then, monsieur;" Aksakoff addressed the colouring young gentleman.

"Heart-disease," flashed Lady Jim, gaily--"Ah, M. Demetrius!"--and so did her ex-lover out of a retort. "You know Miss Tallentire--Mr. Askew; they were at Firmingham, if you remember. And M. Aksakoff, who will doubtless recall Dr. Demetrius."

"Say Prince Constantine Demetrius, madame.

"You place me too high," said the doctor, bowing stiffly. "Out of Russia I am but a simple physician."

"And a remarkably clever one, according to this lady."

"Madame flatters. I failed, where I should have succeeded."

Leah murmured a sharp aside, reproving the professional humility which necessitated an allusion to her loss. A bowing waiter entered before the doctor's apologetic shrug could be followed by words.

"Madame is served," said the waiter, and the lift lowered five hungry people to the dining-room.

Says a disciple of Brillat-Savarin, with solemn truth and the infallible judgment of experience, "Breakfast in Scotland, lunch in America, and dine in Paris." Circumstances prevented Lady Jim from dispensing Boston hospitality, but having supervised the ideas of the Henri-Trois chef, she placed a very dainty and tempting repast before a quartette almost too hungry to be critical. Nor was wanting wine, chosen with masculine discretion, to loosen rusty tongues and release fair thoughts embedded in slow brains. But this latter adjective must be taken--very appropriately at table--with a grain of salt. None of those who ate and drank were dull; three of them, indeed, were much too clever, and the remaining two made up in sparkle what they lacked in depth. Many good things were eaten and said during that merry meal, and the corner near the large window bubbled with laughter. Leah, watching stealthily the courtesy of Aksakoff and his fellow-countryman, shivered internally at the irony of circumstances. Paris--Havre--Kronstadt--Siberia: the four names repeated themselves dolorously in her brain like a street cry. What wonder, then, that the spectacle of this tragic comedy made her laugh and babble, and smile and nod, and play to perfection the rôle of an attentive hostess. She was quite glad that what would prove in all probability to be her victim's last civilised meal was appetising. Aksakoff professed himself charmed with her esprit. Here, thought he, were the makings of an ideal conspirator, and he regretted her nationality. The Anglo-Saxon nature is so alien to working mole-fashion. Yet, had he only known the truth, Lady Jim had already proved her willingness to conspire, if not against a throne, at least for the cheating of a limited company.

The luncheon was thus pleasant, and not less so the digestive hour, when the repleted guests assembled in the sitting-room. Anxious to afford the diplomatist every assistance, Lady Jim gathered the young people under her wing near the piano at the far end of the apartment. Joan, who had more of a soul than a memory for music, played scraps, chatting to right and left while her nimble fingers ran from Mozart to Chopin and attempted what their owner remembered of Wagner's creations. Thus the Muscovites, smoking by special permission, were enabled to exchange views in comparative privacy. To assure complete secrecy, and with the hole-and-corner instinct of the Slav, they talked Russian with a bluntness strangely opposed to Lady Jim's elusive suggestiveness. The situation--to Demetrius, at least--did not admit of sugared phrases or ambiguous explanations.

"Madame yonder"--he nodded towards Leah--"told you why I desired this interview."

"Yes!"--Aksakoff handled his cigarette daintily--"but an explanation from you is necessary."

Demetrius nodded brusquely. "I must mention the name of your daughter."

"Without doubt, since her welfare is the main object of our meeting."

"Mademoiselle Aksakoff," said Demetrius, coldly, "has done me the honour to admire me. But that my affections are already engaged, I should certainly reciprocate."

"You allude to Mademoiselle Ninette?"

A look of surprise flitted across the other's face. "The actress? Why should you think so?"

"Rumour credits you with being her lover."

"And, as usual, rumour is wrong. Mademoiselle Ninette was assuredly my patient, but I received my fees in gold, not in kisses. As poor Dr. Demetrius I I cannot live on love, Ivan Aksakoff."

"Prince Constantine will be able to do so with the lady he mentions."

"I mentioned no lady."

"Ah, pardon!" Aksakoff was foiled. "You accept my apology?"

"None is needed. I intended to tell you the name of the lady, Ivan Aksakoff; it is madame yonder."

With uplifted eyebrows the diplomatist glanced in the direction of Leah.

"I heard something in London clubs of your admiration for her, Constantine Demetrius; even before her husband died it was said that you had laid yourself at her feet. What a pity you cannot marry her! An ideal match, my friend; quite ideal, and so useful in promoting a social understanding between Holy Russia and these islanders."

"We marry in a year," announced the doctor, calmly.

"Ah, no; but pardon me, it is impossible!" Aksakoff, really and truly startled, dropped his cigarette. That haughty Lady James Kaimes should---- "It is quite impossible," said he, staring.

"I refer you to the lady herself," insisted Demetrius.

"A-a-a-h!" droned the other, picking up his cigarette to place it in the ash-tray, and lighting another; "y-e-s!" He stared again at his companion, then stole a glance at Leah. Apparently her desire to assist Muscovite politics was not entirely a question of pounds, shillings, and pence. She was less sordid and more subtle than he had guessed.

Demetrius, giving him no time to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, went on with his explanation. "You will, therefore, understand that my marriage with your daughter is out of the question."

"Of course," assented Aksakoff, absently, and wondering why Lady Jim engaged herself to this exile. "Of course," he added more briskly, "I trust you will permit me to announce this engagement to my daughter."

"Certainly. It will show her that----"

"That you are unworthy of her hand," ended Aksakoff, sharply, for here the father overleaped the diplomatist.

"Quite so, Ivan Aksakoff, and I hope soon to congratulate the Countess Petrovitch."

"You are too good, Constantine Demetrius." "In return for thus arranging your domestic affairs," continued the doctor, unmoved by the sarcasm, "will you gain my pardon from the Czar? Can you gain it?" he asked with emphasis.

"I can and will."

"My title, my money----"

"Both shall be restored. And of course," added Aksakoff, with a keen glance, "you will no longer work in what you term the sacred cause of humanity."

Demetrius waved his hand gloomily. "Dreams of youth--desires for the impossible. I am aware," he added bitterly, "that individuality in a bureaucratic administration is looked upon as a crime."

"Can you wonder at it? If one wheel refuses to fit in with another, the machine will not work. We are all parts of a mighty engine----"

"Which crushes the poor and the weak."

"What matter, since you, Constantine Demetrius, are neither poor nor weak?"

"My sympathy----"

"A most dangerous word, current only in that Utopia you dreamed of. It is not in the Russian dictionary."

Demetrius turned on the scoffer a glittering eye. "It will be, some day," said he, slowly.

"My friend"--Aksakoff shook the ash from his cigarette--"if you propose to edit dictionaries you must remain Dr. Demetrius--in exile."

"I gladly would," rejoined the other, heartily; "only----" His voice died away, as he looked towards Lady Jim.

The diplomatist laughed. "There is always a woman. Ah, these dear ladies, how practical they are! In their hands we are wax, which they mould after the honey is squeezed out;" he laughed again, then resumed, business-like: "You will write to my daughter and place the truth of this engagement beyond question."

"To-morrow, Ivan Aksakoff, when I am in London. And needless to say, I shall always profoundly respect Mademoiselle your daughter."

"You mean the Countess Petrovitch."

"If you can so far bend her to your ambition," retorted Demetrius. "You promise, then, to right me with the Czar?"

Aksakoff nodded and laughed cynically. "You are already Prince Constantine Demetrius, rich, honoured, and--unsympathetic." The doctor winced at the last word, but shook hands on the agreement. Lady Jim glanced across the room with Judas and his kiss in her mind. That the cap fitted her, also, she did not consider for the moment.

"Coffee! Coffee!" cried the pianist, rising. "Just what I want."

"It is tea on this occasion," replied Leah, and went over to take charge of the tray brought in by a smiling waiter.

"Tea?" Joan echoed the word in an amazed voice, and tripped like a fairy towards a comfortable low chair. "Who ever heard of tea in the middle of the day?"

"Australian colonists in the back blocks," explained Askew, sauntering to assist in arranging a harlequin set of cups. "They drink tea at all hours."

"In Russia, also," remarked Lady Jim, jingling the saucers. "This is a concession to the prejudices of our foreign guests;" and she laughed amiably at the Muscovites.

Demetrius bowed and smiled, twisting his waxed moustache with admiring glances at Leah's red hair. He was far from suspecting a snare, and that Aksakoff

should have a finger and thumb in his waistcoat-pocket did not seem remarkable. But Lady Jim--nervously on the alert--guessed that the diplomatist was fiddling with something of a narcotic nature. Also, his significant glance at her, at the teacups, at Demetrius, hinted at her duty. She fulfilled it with a spasm of fear, well masked by frivolity.

"Joan, I have dropped my handkerchief--near the piano, I think. Will you please look for it?"

Miss Tallentire rose, to be anticipated, as Leah guessed she would be, by two attentive gentlemen. "Allow me!" "Permit me, mademoiselle!" and with Askew, Demetrius crossed for the search, while Lady Jim ran on lightly:

"It might be on the floor near you, Joan. What a nuisance! How stupid of me!"

Then Joan looked on the carpet--Leah also, the latter straining her ears to hear the almost inaudible. The faint tinkle of a pellet dropped into a cup sounded to her guilty soul like a clap of thunder.

"Here it is," cried Joan, fishing under the table, and picking up what Lady Jim had purposely dropped.

"Thanks awfully, dear. Mr. Askew, M. Demetrius, do not trouble. Give me the teapot, Joan. Ah!" she babbled on, while filling the cups--"What a pity we have not glasses, so that you could drink the tea in your own fashion, M. Demetrius. M. Aksakoff, we did so enjoy the novelty at your Monte Carlo villa. Still, here is a lemon; slice it, Joan, dear. Do sit down, doctor. M. Aksakoff, you can be waiter."

"Allow me," cried Askew, half rising.

"Sit where you are," said Leah, sharply; "you'll upset the table. M. Aksakoff!"

"With pleasure, madame;" and he obliged her with stiff cordiality.

Leah wiped her lips, which were dry, and stole a stealthy glance at the cup which he handed to the doctor. It was of a deep blue colour. "Augh!" she breathed, as he set it to his lips.

"You are wearied with your duties, madame," conjectured Aksakoff, sipping with gusto; "and I, alas, can relieve you only by acting as waiter."

"You are a guest now," she rejoined, with a nervous laugh; "is the tea to your liking?"

"Most delightful tea," said Demetrius, courteously.

"You compliment the decoction too highly. Tea on the Continent is like rain in the Sahara. I except Russia, of course," she ended, smiling.

"You will find us English in many ways, when you visit Moscow, madame."

Leah looked inquisitively at Aksakoff, who spoke, guessing that he was in possession of the truth, and wondering what he thought of the engagement. The man's face betrayed nothing, however, and her gaze travelled to Demetrius. He was sitting perfectly still, and his eyes looked dull, as though the fire of life was dwindling within. Meeting her smile, he roused himself with a jerk and an apology.

"I feel sleepy--the heat, no doubt," he murmured.

"I can't say that I feel scorching," said Askew, glancing through the window at a grey sky.

"You are used to the tropics; M. Demetrius is not," observed Aksakoff.

Joan laughed. "You remind me of a horrid story my brother told me. An old Anglo-Indian was being cremated at Woking, and said that it was the first time he had felt warm in England."

"A horrid story indeed," murmured Lady Jim, with her eyes on the expressionless face of Demetrius. "You shouldn't tell it, dear." Then she rose hurriedly: "Are you quite well, M. Demetrius?"

"Oh yes--quite;" the doctor's voice droned into an inarticulate mumble and his head fell forward.

"Oh! Mr. Askew--M. Aksakoff--what is the matter? His eyes are closed; his breathing--just listen!"

"Kind of fit, perhaps," said Askew, rising to shake Demetrius, and so extorted a cry from the kind-hearted hostess.

"Don't--the man is ill! Oh, how dreadful! Loosen his collar--open the window. I wonder if he needs a doctor," and she stepped to the electric button of the bell.

"There might be one in the hotel," said Aksakoff, as Joan and Askew obeyed her directions. And from the tone of his voice she knew that there was one in the hotel. "It really seems to be a kind of fit," said Aksakoff, looking at the now unconscious man. "Yet he appeared to be quite well a few minutes ago."

Leah did not hear. She was already at the door issuing hurried instructions to a waiter, whose smile had vanished. When she came back the two men had placed Demetrius on the sofa, where he lay breathing heavily, his face white and his lips purple; not a pleasant sight by any means, as Askew thought.

"Had not you ladies better retire?" he suggested.

"No, no!" they cried in one breath. "We must help."

"Only the doctor can do that--if there is one," said Aksakoff, observing his handiwork on the sofa with a critical eye.

Then, at the tail of a triple rap, entered the fat proprietor of the Henri Trois, scared in looks and importantly fussy in manner. Behind him glided a spick-and-span man, not unlike Demetrius, and unmistakably Tartar.

"Dr. Helfmann happened to be luncheoning," explained M. Gravier, "fortunately. What is the matter, madame?"

Helfmann soon explained that. He felt the pulse of the patient, laid a gentle hand on a weakly-beating heart, and turned up the purple eyelids. Askew and Aksakoff stood aside with the proprietor. Lady Jim and Joan bent forward with pale faces and clasped hands, anxious for the verdict.

"A kind of fit," explained the doctor; "he will be insensible for two--three hours."

"In my hotel? Ach!--the scandal!" cried Gravier, spreading his fat hands in dismay.

"Is it really a fit?" asked Lady Jim, paying no attention.

"Madame"--the doctor faced her coldly--"to speak technically would not enlighten you. I can bring this gentleman back to his senses; but I think--with your permission," added he, bowing, "that if you will permit me to take him in a cab to a chemist's shop where I can procure the drug I require, it will save time. And in this case"--he glanced calmly at the unconscious man--"time means life."

"Ugh!" said Askew. "Take him away at once."

"If you think it is better," murmured Lady Jim, not daring to meet the victorious eye of the diplomatist.

"Of course," rejoined Askew, brusquely. "You and Miss Tallentire can do nothing, and the sight is not a pleasant one."

"Joan;" Lady Jim drew the girl away, and passed with her into the bedroom adjoining. There behind a closed door they listened to the sound of a body being removed. The scraping of feet, the heavy breathing of laden men, the bumping and humping of something soft (horrible suggestion)--they could hear these intimations of removal very plainly. Leah sat on the bed with tightly clasped hands between slack knees. "Augh!" said Leah.

"It is all right, Lady James," said Joan, petting her. "Poor M. Demetrius will soon be all right. I wonder what made him ill?"

"I wonder," echoed Lady Jim, and wondered very truly. She could not understand what drug Aksakoff had used to reduce Demetrius so rapidly to unconsciousness. And not another word was spoken for ten minutes.

"They have driven away in a fiacre," announced Miss Tallentire, from the window.

"Who have driven?"

"That doctor and M. Demetrius."

"Not M. Aksakoff?"

Before her question could be answered a sharp knock came to the door, and Aksakoff presented himself when it was opened.

"All is well, dear ladies," said he, blandly. "Dr. Helfmann has gone with our sick friend. Mr. Askew follows to see that all is well."

"Askew follows?" said Lady Jim, with a sharp glance; "but why----?"

The diplomatist still smiled. "He has a kind heart, that young Mr. Askew, and so---" he shrugged, then bowed to Joan. "I compliment you, mademoiselle, on your courage. You also, madame. And now, all being well, I must take my leave;" he kissed Lady Jim's hand. "I shall see you again in London, as to-night I journey to Havre."

He went out, and Leah again heard four names as though a ghostly porter was calling them at a ghostly junction.

"Paris, Havre, Kronstadt, Siberia," said the ghostly porter.

"Ugh!" said Lady Jim.

CHAPTER XXIV

Alone and punctual, hungry for mid-day victuals, and eager to impart newly acquired knowledge, Miss Tallentire returned from studying the Luxor Obelisk. Her coming upon the hour and solitary state were noted, but a second-hand rendering of hieroglyphic lore could be dispensed with by a lady entertaining a more modern-minded guest. Aksakoff, with a notable sparkle in his eyes--begotten by confidential conversation with his hostess--rose to welcome the fair interrupter. International courtesies were exchanged, while Leah, glancing

impatiently at the clock, waited for their conclusion to slip in a question or so.

"Where is Mr. Askew? Why did he not bring you back?"

"He did, Lady James, as far as the lift. He is now writing a letter in the smoking-room."

"And so will forget that I asked him to luncheon. Please remind him, dear; or, better, tell the waiter to bring him up. M. Demetrius is coming also."

"Dr. Demetrius!" Joan paused in her exit. "I did not know that he was in Paris, Lady James."

"Nor did I until an hour ago. Don't lose time, dear. Mr. Askew may go, and I particularly wish him to stay."

Lady Jim ushered the girl out hurriedly, judiciously saw to the

Lady Jim ushered the girl out hurriedly, and judiciously saw to the closing of the door, before turning to meet Aksakoff's inquiring gaze. "You approve of a full table, madame?"

"There is safety in numbers," she assured him.

"For M. Demetrius?"

Leah resumed her seat with raised eyebrows. "I fear you will think me dull, M. Aksakoff, but I do not understand."

The diplomatist bowed an apology. He had forgotten that even in private her comedy was to be played by the book. The conversation of the next few minutes he foresaw very plainly. She would play round the reason for their meeting, without coming to grips, mysteriously conveying her meaning in speeches which she did not mean. Only a politician of Aksakoff's subtlety would have understood the unsaid from what she now proceeded to say.

"Besides"--she was continuing the speech interrupted by his bow--"you promised that no harm should come to the doctor."

"Madame, I renew that promise."

"I hope so; otherwise, I shall regret having consented to this meeting."

"Yet I understood that M. Demetrius desired it."

"That is no reason why I should consent."

"Possibly not. Still, as a peacemaker----"

"You put me into the Beatitudes, then?"

"Why not, if you achieve your object in reconciling enemies?"

"The signing of the treaty depends upon you, M. Aksakoff."

"Consider it signed--on conditions."

"Which means that it is not signed. H'm! M. Demetrius is anxious, even willing, to renounce your daughter."

A dull red stained Aksakoff's opaque skin. "How flattering to my fatherly pride! There is, then"--the hint was delicate--"another?"

Lady Jim retorted in kind. "So you said at Monte Carlo."

"Mademoiselle Ninette? I believe I did. She lured him to Paris, then?"

"How should I know? He has never mentioned the creature's name to me, nor would he dare to. He came, so he declares, to see me."

"On matters connected with your recent loss, no doubt."

"It is more than probable."

Her avoidance of the necessary topic exasperated him. Sharp words were on the tip of his tongue, but wisdom withheld them. His accomplice was not the woman to yield to dominance, and the merest hint of its exercise might, probably would, engender wrath likely to jeopardise the almost achieved plot. Money or no money--Aksakoff still ascribed mercenary reasons--her pride would never bend to the yoke of advice. To be silent was his second thought, and silent he became. This, it would seem, was wise, since she began to explain, Aksakoff paying out liberally the necessary rope that she might hang herself.

"M. Demetrius is unwise to come here. I told him so; yes, I confess--remember my warning--that I betrayed you. All the same--very foolishly, I think--he insisted upon an immediate meeting, to recover his birthright, he says. Can you arrange for the rehabilitation, of this exiled Esau?"

A faint smile played round the diplomatist's thin lips, "I can!"

"And you will?"

"Assuredly, if M. Demetrius disabuses Katinka of her infatuation."

"That is his affair and yours. No doubt"--she spoke meaningly--"you will wish to speak to him privately?"

"There is no need, madame, seeing that you are in his confidence, and in mine. Besides"--very slowly--"we can converse over our tea."

Lady Jim's nerves jumped. "Over tea," she echoed equally slowly--"tea, after luncheon?"

"It is a Russian custom. M. Demetrius and I are Russians. Still, if the suggestion appears presumptuous"--he waved his hand with assumed deprecation--"I withdraw it and apologise."

"No!" She passed her tongue over dry, white lips, and answered faintly. "You shall have your--tea." Then, rising hurriedly, she made for the near window on an obvious excuse. "I do not see him coming."

As plainly as though Aksakoff had put it into words did Lady Jim know that he intended to drug their victim. What would occur if this plotter succeeded she did not know; what might occur she shivered to think of, and the thought made her rash. "The police!" she murmured, turning from the window.

M. Aksakoff joined her, adjusting his pince-nez leisurely, and proceeded to look up and down the street, two stories below. "I do not see the police, madame. But what a delightful day! I trust the night will be equally mild, since I journey to Havre."

"You go to Havre--to-night?" breathed Leah, not yet herself.

"By a moderately late train. My cousin, Count Petrovitch, is there with his yacht. We have to talk about his possible marriage with my daughter, before he leaves to-morrow for Kronstadt."

"Oh!" sighed Lady Jim, very white. "How--how--amusing!" and after misusing the word, she went back to her chair with geographical thoughts. Paris--Havre--Kronstadt--Siberia; and Demetrius. "Oh!" sighed she again, with a trembling hand shielding her eyes.

"You are ailing, madame," cried Aksakoff, hastening to her politely.

"Starving!" replied Leah, with a wry smile. "Hush!"

The warning hissed through the chatter of Joan and Askew, who entered, almost riotously happy. Their exuberant manners and frank speech brought a wholesome breeze of cleansing honesty into the atmosphere of stale rascality. The bracing wind blew Lady Jim out of dark chambers into the day-lit spaces of the commonplace. With the protean capability of women she flashed as a sun from passing storm-clouds, to shine on the honest and hungry.

"Thanks awfully for your invitation to luncheon," said Askew.

"Which you forgot."

"Did I ever receive it?" he asked doubtfully.

"Did not my last remark imply the invitation. Remarkable!"

So irrelevant sounded the last word that Aksakoff queried its reason.

"Not that a man should forget an invitation," she explained; "but that a single meal should escape his greedy memory."

"You make me out to be a gourmet," hinted the invited guest.

"Why not a gourmand? One speaks French in Paris."

"Not invariably, since we now converse in English," said Askew, dryly; and she approved of the retort. Clearly he was rapidly recovering from the green-sickness of crude passion.

Meantime Joan instructed Aksakoff in ancient history. "The hieroglyphics on the Place de la Concorde Obelisk describe the triumphs of Rameses II., who reigned over Egypt in the fourteenth century before Christ. Mr. Askew knows him."

"Indeed?" smiled Lady Jim. "Is he stopping in Paris?"

"Miss Tallentire means to say that I know 'of him.'"

"Well, I said so. But my English _is_ faulty."

"Mr. Askew will surely improve it. His knowledge of hieroglyphics----"

"The guide-book's knowledge, Lady James," corrected Askew.

"Hum! Information while you wait--Murray and Baedeker's extract of history--archeological tabloids."

"What felicitous phrases!"

"Sarcasm! That surely means--convalescence."

"You have been ill then, monsieur;" Aksakoff addressed the colouring young gentleman.

"Heart-disease," flashed Lady Jim, gaily--"Ah, M. Demetrius!"--and so did her ex-lover out of a retort. "You know Miss Tallentire--Mr. Askew; they were at Firmingham, if you remember. And M. Aksakoff, who will doubtless recall Dr. Demetrius."

"Say Prince Constantine Demetrius, madame.

"You place me too high," said the doctor, bowing stiffly. "Out of Russia I am but a simple physician."

"And a remarkably clever one, according to this lady."

"Madame flatters. I failed, where I should have succeeded."

Leah murmured a sharp aside, reproving the professional humility which necessitated an allusion to her loss. A bowing waiter entered before the doctor's apologetic shrug could be followed by words.

"Madame is served," said the waiter, and the lift lowered five hungry people to the dining-room.

Says a disciple of Brillat-Savarin, with solemn truth and the infallible judgment of experience, "Breakfast in Scotland, lunch in America, and dine in Paris." Circumstances prevented Lady Jim from dispensing Boston hospitality, but having supervised the ideas of the Henri-Trois chef, she placed a very dainty and tempting repast before a quartette almost too hungry to be critical. Nor was wanting wine, chosen with masculine discretion, to loosen rusty tongues and release fair thoughts embedded in slow brains. But this latter adjective must be taken--very appropriately at table--with a grain of salt. None of those who ate and drank were dull; three of them, indeed, were much too clever, and the remaining two made up in sparkle what they lacked in depth. Many good things were eaten and said during that merry meal, and the corner near the large window bubbled with laughter. Leah, watching stealthily the courtesy of Aksakoff and his fellow-countryman, shivered internally at the irony of circumstances. Paris--Havre--Kronstadt--Siberia: the four names repeated themselves dolorously in her brain like a street cry. What wonder, then, that the spectacle of this tragic comedy made her laugh and babble, and smile and nod, and play to perfection the rôle of an attentive hostess. She was quite glad that what would prove in all probability to be her victim's last civilised meal was appetising. Aksakoff professed himself charmed with her esprit. Here, thought he, were the makings of an ideal conspirator, and he regretted her nationality. The Anglo-Saxon nature is so alien to working mole-fashion. Yet, had he only known the truth, Lady Jim had already proved her willingness to conspire, if not against a throne, at least for the cheating of a limited company.

The luncheon was thus pleasant, and not less so the digestive hour, when the repleted guests assembled in the sitting-room. Anxious to afford the diplomatist every assistance, Lady Jim gathered the young people under her wing near the piano at the far end of the apartment. Joan, who had more of a soul than a memory for music, played scraps, chatting to right and left while her nimble fingers ran from Mozart to Chopin and attempted what their owner remembered of Wagner's creations. Thus the Muscovites, smoking by special permission, were enabled to exchange views in comparative privacy. To assure complete secrecy, and with the hole-and-corner instinct of the Slav, they talked Russian with a bluntness strangely opposed to Lady Jim's elusive suggestiveness. The situation--to Demetrius, at least--did not admit of sugared phrases or ambiguous explanations.

"Madame yonder"--he nodded towards Leah--"told you why I desired this interview."

"Yes!"--Aksakoff handled his cigarette daintily--"but an explanation from you is necessary."

Demetrius nodded brusquely. "I must mention the name of your daughter."

"Without doubt, since her welfare is the main object of our meeting."

"Mademoiselle Aksakoff," said Demetrius, coldly, "has done me the honour to admire me. But that my affections are already engaged, I should certainly reciprocate."

"You allude to Mademoiselle Ninette?"

A look of surprise flitted across the other's face. "The actress? Why should you think so?"

"Rumour credits you with being her lover."

"And, as usual, rumour is wrong. Mademoiselle Ninette was assuredly my patient, but I received my fees in gold, not in kisses. As poor Dr. Demetrius I I cannot live on love, Ivan Aksakoff."

"Prince Constantine will be able to do so with the lady he mentions."

"I mentioned no lady."

"Ah, pardon!" Aksakoff was foiled. "You accept my apology?"

"None is needed. I intended to tell you the name of the lady, Ivan Aksakoff; it is madame yonder."

With uplifted eyebrows the diplomatist glanced in the direction of Leah.

"I heard something in London clubs of your admiration for her, Constantine Demetrius; even before her husband died it was said that you had laid yourself at her feet. What a pity you cannot marry her! An ideal match, my friend; quite ideal, and so useful in promoting a social understanding between Holy Russia

and these islanders."

"We marry in a year," announced the doctor, calmly.

"Ah, no; but pardon me, it is impossible!" Aksakoff, really and truly startled, dropped his cigarette. That haughty Lady James Kaimes should---- "It is quite impossible," said he, staring.

"I refer you to the lady herself," insisted Demetrius.

"A-a-a-h!" droned the other, picking up his cigarette to place it in the ash-tray, and lighting another; "y-e-s!" He stared again at his companion, then stole a glance at Leah. Apparently her desire to assist Muscovite politics was not entirely a question of pounds, shillings, and pence. She was less sordid and more subtle than he had guessed.

Demetrius, giving him no time to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, went on with his explanation. "You will, therefore, understand that my marriage with your daughter is out of the question."

"Of course," assented Aksakoff, absently, and wondering why Lady Jim engaged herself to this exile. "Of course," he added more briskly, "I trust you will permit me to announce this engagement to my daughter."

"Certainly. It will show her that----"

"That you are unworthy of her hand," ended Aksakoff, sharply, for here the father overleaped the diplomatist.

"Quite so, Ivan Aksakoff, and I hope soon to congratulate the Countess Petrovitch."

"You are too good, Constantine Demetrius." "In return for thus arranging your domestic affairs," continued the doctor, unmoved by the sarcasm, "will you gain my pardon from the Czar? Can you gain it?" he asked with emphasis.

"I can and will."

"My title, my money----"

"Both shall be restored. And of course," added Aksakoff, with a keen glance, "you will no longer work in what you term the sacred cause of humanity."

Demetrius waved his hand gloomily. "Dreams of youth--desires for the impossible. I am aware," he added bitterly, "that individuality in a bureaucratic administration is looked upon as a crime."

"Can you wonder at it? If one wheel refuses to fit in with another, the machine will not work. We are all parts of a mighty engine----"

"Which crushes the poor and the weak."

"What matter, since you, Constantine Demetrius, are neither poor nor weak?"

"My sympathy----"

"A most dangerous word, current only in that Utopia you dreamed of. It is not in the Russian dictionary."

Demetrius turned on the scoffer a glittering eye. "It will be, some day," said he, slowly.

"My friend"--Aksakoff shook the ash from his cigarette--"if you propose to edit dictionaries you must remain Dr. Demetrius--in exile."

"I gladly would," rejoined the other, heartily; "only----" His voice died away, as he looked towards Lady Jim.

The diplomatist laughed. "There is always a woman. Ah, these dear ladies, how practical they are! In their hands we are wax, which they mould after the honey is squeezed out;" he laughed again, then resumed, business-like: "You will write to my daughter and place the truth of this engagement beyond question."

"To-morrow, Ivan Aksakoff, when I am in London. And needless to say, I shall always profoundly respect Mademoiselle your daughter."

"You mean the Countess Petrovitch."

"If you can so far bend her to your ambition," retorted Demetrius. "You promise, then, to right me with the Czar?"

Aksakoff nodded and laughed cynically. "You are already Prince Constantine Demetrius, rich, honoured, and--unsympathetic." The doctor winced at the last word, but shook hands on the agreement. Lady Jim glanced across the room with Judas and his kiss in her mind. That the cap fitted her, also, she did not consider for the moment.

"Coffee! Coffee!" cried the pianist, rising. "Just what I want."

"It is tea on this occasion," replied Leah, and went over to take charge of the tray brought in by a smiling waiter.

"Tea?" Joan echoed the word in an amazed voice, and tripped like a fairy towards a comfortable low chair. "Who ever heard of tea in the middle of the day?"

"Australian colonists in the back blocks," explained Askew, sauntering to assist in arranging a harlequin set of cups. "They drink tea at all hours."

"In Russia, also," remarked Lady Jim, jingling the saucers. "This is a concession to the prejudices of our foreign guests;" and she laughed amiably at the Muscovites.

Demetrius bowed and smiled, twisting his waxed moustache with admiring glances at Leah's red hair. He was far from suspecting a snare, and that Aksakoff should have a finger and thumb in his waistcoat-pocket did not seem remarkable. But Lady Jim--nervously on the alert--guessed that the diplomatist was fiddling with something of a narcotic nature. Also, his significant glance at her, at the teacups, at Demetrius, hinted at her duty. She fulfilled it with a spasm of fear, well masked by frivolity.

"Joan, I have dropped my handkerchief--near the piano, I think. Will you please look for it?"

Miss Tallentire rose, to be anticipated, as Leah guessed she would be, by two attentive gentlemen. "Allow me!" "Permit me, mademoiselle!" and with Askew, Demetrius crossed for the search, while Lady Jim ran on lightly:

"It might be on the floor near you, Joan. What a nuisance! How stupid of me!"

Then Joan looked on the carpet--Leah also, the latter straining her ears to hear the almost inaudible. The faint tinkle of a pellet dropped into a cup sounded to her guilty soul like a clap of thunder.

"Here it is," cried Joan, fishing under the table, and picking up what Lady Jim had purposely dropped.

"Thanks awfully, dear. Mr. Askew, M. Demetrius, do not trouble. Give me the teapot, Joan. Ah!" she babbled on, while filling the cups--"What a pity we have not glasses, so that you could drink the tea in your own fashion, M. Demetrius. M. Aksakoff, we did so enjoy the novelty at your Monte Carlo villa. Still, here is a lemon; slice it, Joan, dear. Do sit down, doctor. M. Aksakoff, you can be waiter."

"Allow me," cried Askew, half rising.

"Sit where you are," said Leah, sharply; "you'll upset the table. M. Aksakoff!"

"With pleasure, madame;" and he obliged her with stiff cordiality.

Leah wiped her lips, which were dry, and stole a stealthy glance at the cup which he handed to the doctor. It was of a deep blue colour. "Augh!" she breathed, as he set it to his lips.

"You are wearied with your duties, madame," conjectured Aksakoff, sipping with gusto; "and I, alas, can relieve you only by acting as waiter."

"You are a guest now," she rejoined, with a nervous laugh; "is the tea to your liking?"

"Most delightful tea," said Demetrius, courteously.

"You compliment the decoction too highly. Tea on the Continent is like rain in the Sahara. I except Russia, of course," she ended, smiling.

"You will find us English in many ways, when you visit Moscow, madame."

Leah looked inquisitively at Aksakoff, who spoke, guessing that he was in possession of the truth, and wondering what he thought of the engagement. The man's face betrayed nothing, however, and her gaze travelled to Demetrius. He

was sitting perfectly still, and his eyes looked dull, as though the fire of life was dwindling within. Meeting her smile, he roused himself with a jerk and an apology.

"I feel sleepy--the heat, no doubt," he murmured.

"I can't say that I feel scorching," said Askew, glancing through the window at a grey sky.

"You are used to the tropics; M. Demetrius is not," observed Aksakoff.

Joan laughed. "You remind me of a horrid story my brother told me. An old Anglo-Indian was being cremated at Woking, and said that it was the first time he had felt warm in England."

"A horrid story indeed," murmured Lady Jim, with her eyes on the expressionless face of Demetrius. "You shouldn't tell it, dear." Then she rose hurriedly: "Are you quite well, M. Demetrius?"

"Oh yes--quite;" the doctor's voice droned into an inarticulate mumble and his head fell forward.

"Oh! Mr. Askew--M. Aksakoff--what is the matter? His eyes are closed; his breathing--just listen!"

"Kind of fit, perhaps," said Askew, rising to shake Demetrius, and so extorted a cry from the kind-hearted hostess.

"Don't--the man is ill! Oh, how dreadful! Loosen his collar--open the window. I wonder if he needs a doctor," and she stepped to the electric button of the bell.

"There might be one in the hotel," said Aksakoff, as Joan and Askew obeyed her directions. And from the tone of his voice she knew that there was one in the hotel. "It really seems to be a kind of fit," said Aksakoff, looking at the now unconscious man. "Yet he appeared to be quite well a few minutes ago."

Leah did not hear. She was already at the door issuing hurried instructions to a waiter, whose smile had vanished. When she came back the two men had placed Demetrius on the sofa, where he lay breathing heavily, his face white and his lips purple; not a pleasant sight by any means, as Askew thought.

"Had not you ladies better retire?" he suggested.

"No, no!" they cried in one breath. "We must help."

"Only the doctor can do that--if there is one," said Aksakoff, observing his handiwork on the sofa with a critical eye.

Then, at the tail of a triple rap, entered the fat proprietor of the Henri Trois, scared in looks and importantly fussy in manner. Behind him glided a spick-and-span man, not unlike Demetrius, and unmistakably Tartar.

"Dr. Helfmann happened to be luncheoning," explained M. Gravier, "fortunately. What is the matter, madame?"

Helfmann soon explained that. He felt the pulse of the patient, laid a gentle hand on a weakly-beating heart, and turned up the purple eyelids. Askew and Aksakoff stood aside with the proprietor. Lady Jim and Joan bent forward with pale faces and clasped hands, anxious for the verdict.

"A kind of fit," explained the doctor; "he will be insensible for two--three hours."

"In my hotel? Ach!--the scandal!" cried Gravier, spreading his fat hands in dismay.

"Is it really a fit?" asked Lady Jim, paying no attention.

"Madame"--the doctor faced her coldly--"to speak technically would not enlighten you. I can bring this gentleman back to his senses; but I think--with your permission," added he, bowing, "that if you will permit me to take him in a cab to a chemist's shop where I can procure the drug I require, it will save time. And in this case"--he glanced calmly at the unconscious man--"time means life."

"Ugh!" said Askew. "Take him away at once."

"If you think it is better," murmured Lady Jim, not daring to meet the victorious eye of the diplomatist.

"Of course," rejoined Askew, brusquely. "You and Miss Tallentire can do nothing, and the sight is not a pleasant one."

"Joan;" Lady Jim drew the girl away, and passed with her into the bedroom adjoining. There behind a closed door they listened to the sound of a body being removed. The scraping of feet, the heavy breathing of laden men, the bumping and humping of something soft (horrible suggestion)--they could hear these intimations of removal very plainly. Leah sat on the bed with tightly clasped hands between slack knees. "Augh!" said Leah.

"It is all right, Lady James," said Joan, petting her. "Poor M. Demetrius will soon be all right. I wonder what made him ill?"

"I wonder," echoed Lady Jim, and wondered very truly. She could not understand what drug Aksakoff had used to reduce Demetrius so rapidly to unconsciousness. And not another word was spoken for ten minutes.

"They have driven away in a fiacre," announced Miss Tallentire, from the window.

"Who have driven?"

"That doctor and M. Demetrius."

"Not M. Aksakoff?"

Before her question could be answered a sharp knock came to the door, and Aksakoff presented himself when it was opened.

"All is well, dear ladies," said he, blandly. "Dr. Helfmann has gone with our sick friend. Mr. Askew follows to see that all is well."

"Askew follows?" said Lady Jim, with a sharp glance; "but why----?"

The diplomatist still smiled. "He has a kind heart, that young Mr. Askew, and so---" he shrugged, then bowed to Joan. "I compliment you, mademoiselle, on your courage. You also, madame. And now, all being well, I must take my leave;" he kissed Lady Jim's hand. "I shall see you again in London, as to-night I journey to Havre."

He went out, and Leah again heard four names as though a ghostly porter was calling them at a ghostly junction.

"Paris, Havre, Kronstadt, Siberia," said the ghostly porter.

"Ugh!" said Lady Jim.

CHAPTER XXV

Joan was less surprised than a better informed lady when no word of the sick man's progress came to hand. Aksakoff was presumably at Havre, and Askew, having missed the fiacre, and called uselessly at a chemist's shop indicated by Helfmann, clamoured for information. Unacquainted with the address of Demetrius, no information could be given by Lady Jim; but she proffered a suggestion to keep the budding philanthropist quiet.

"He might be in an hospital."

"He might! Ill go the round."

"Do!" she assented cordially, and quite easy in her mind about this needle-in-a-haystack search.

So Askew, wisely acting immediately on an impulse that could not last, set forth on his quest, only to drift across the path of an old shipmate. The meeting led to cocktails at the American Bar, and the consumption of these involved the calling-up of a past, which made the ex-navy man long to nose the out-trail once more. That his friend who did business in great waters should know of a clean-built schooner-yacht for sale at a ridiculously low price was natural. And equally natural was Askew's determination to cross the Channel that very day, lest the desirable vessel should be snapped up. Thus it came about that he presented himself to Leah, prior to an immediate departure, without recurring to the quest. Lady Jim, however, could not forbear a taunt.

"And your philanthropic search?" she inquired.

Askew coloured, laughed, and shrugged.

"Demetrius is no kith or kin of mine," was his excuse, "and wouldn't do as much for me, I doubt. 'Sides, he's probably on his legs by now, and will come skipping along to see you."

"If he does I shall advise him of your charity."

"No, don't," urged the youth, coolly. "He'll be giving me a testimonial."

Leah laughed good-humouredly. "Well, good-bye," and she shook hands. "Thanks for your company. Joan has enjoyed it immensely."

"And you?"

"Ah!" with a sigh and a twinkle, "think what I have lost."

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning you, man of lightning moods. Philanthropy, love--ten minutes of each. Shall I see you in London?"

"Oh--er--yes. But if I can annex this schooner at a fair price, I'm thinking of a cruise."

"In Pacific waters?"

He grew red and uneasy, shifting from one foot to the other. "I might."

"That means, you will. H'm! The first case I ever knew of a man being off with the new love and on with the old. But"--she held up a finger--"I claim a visit before you go."

Askew seized her hand. "I promise!" Then, coaxingly: "We are friends!"

"Parting friends, and I have already shaken hands with you twice. *Au revoir*, till Curzon Street," and nodding him God-speed, she retired to consider possibilities of preventing a speedy departure. Poor woman! No sooner had she cleared away one obstacle than another bulked in the path. And these, unfortunately, she could

not leap over or go round. They had to be removed by toilsome pick-and-shovel work.

"What a mercy Demetrius is disposed of!" said Lady Jim, to her mirror. "Two new wrinkles. I shan't give that silly boy the chance of adding a third."

On the morning of departure from Paris Leah received a letter from Demetrius, which she showed to Joan, almost as soon as the train steamed out of the Gard du Nord. A week of talk in Paris, and five years' study in England, had instructed Miss Tallentire insufficiently in the French tongue; therefore did she wilt away at the sight of the epistle. Lady Jim translated.

"He is still ill in some hotel"--she was careful not to give the address--"but better, much better. Later he proposes to go to Russia."

"I thought he was an exile," said Joan, doubtfully.

"He is. I think the folly of risking his liberty in St. Petersburg is apparent. But he hopes to cajole the Czar into granting his pardon. M'm!" Leah packed away the letter in her dressing-bag. "I daresay we shall hear of him next in Siberia."

Joan opened a pair of horrified eyes. "Lady James!"

"Oh, it's a charming place, they say, and not at all so disagreeable as people make out. The climate is much more delightful than our own, dear, and the society really intellectual. The Russians send all their clever people there, you know. I am sure Dr. Demetrius will be very comfortable."

"Exile to Siberia! It sounds horrible."

"Yes--sounds, but isn't. You have been reading Tolstoy and seeing melodramas, my dear."

"I thought Dr. Demetrius loved you," said Joan, suddenly.

"Oh, he did; the man was a perfect nuisance. But, you see, I did not love him."

"No, no! Of course you would not. I never meant that. As poor dear Lord James's wife you could not."

"And as poor dear Lord James's widow, I can, only I don't."

Miss Tallentire was still confused. "You must think me dreadfully rude--oh, dreadfully," she murmured, regretting an unintentional insinuation.

"I think you dreadfully innocent, and dreadfully sweet," said Leah, kissing the flushed face. "I'm talking like that horrid Mulrady girl. Where do these Americans pick up their adjectives?"

Even while chatting, and while the train tore through a bleak landscape almost blotted out with rain, Leah wondered who had written the letter. Not Demetrius, certainly, although the calligraphy would have caused an expert to commit perjury. Aksakoff was more clever with tongue than pen, so Leah fell back on Helfmann as a possible forger. Assuredly she did not believe that he was a medical man, and his fortunate presence at the needed hour argued a carefully laid plot. The fiacre probably drove to St. Lazare, and thence Helfmann had no doubt personally conducted his patient to Havre to be shipped on board the Petrovitch yacht. Now the boat was kicking her way through the grey northern seas, and Demetrius, in possession of his senses, was looking forward to a forced passage across the Urals. An unpleasant journey at this time of the year, but needful for men who wanted more than was good for them. And, thank God, this particular man was out of her life for ever. While offering up the hasty prayer Lady Jim touched the peacock's feather, tucked away in her pocket, and felt that life really was worth living, when one knew how to dispose of disagreeable people.

Perhaps the prayer addressed to a Deity other than the fetish made the domestic god sulky, but he, or it, certainly did not expedite Leah's journey to Curzon Street. For two weary days wind and rain, stormy waves and over-cautious officials, detained the travellers in Calais. A hurricane that would have done credit to the South Seas made the Channel impassible, and the waves that Britannia is supposed to rule rebelled furiously against her white cliffs. Leah, inconceivably bored, watched the gusty hours through streaming panes, and wondered if the gale extended to the Mediterranean. If so, the ducal yacht with Frith and his father on board must be having a pitch-and-toss time of the worst. The Duke was no hardened mariner, and uncomfortable motions prolonged to excess might make a man of his age so ill that he would---- Here Leah's vivid imagination produced a shudder. She did not wish the kindly old Duke to die of exhaustion; not that she cared overmuch for him, but Frith succeeding to

unlimited money-bags would be less easy to manage in the important matter of occasional cheques. The insurance money would not last for ever with one of her tastes, and after all--since this greedy Captain Strange would insist upon his dues--she had only twenty-nine thousand pounds. Then Jim would want ready money, and his demands--she knew him of old--would probably be shameless. Of course, seeing that, on the face of it, he was involved deeper than she was in a shady conspiracy, he could be told to mind his own business and marry Señorita Fajardo, if desirous of being kept like a gentleman. But to avoid unnecessary trouble it was probable that she would have to send him a trifle. How dreadful it was to think that a single shilling of that hardly-earned money should slip through her fingers; but the harpies had to be appeased or driven away. She could not achieve the last, therefore her purse-strings would have to be unloosened. Already the pockets of Strange gaped hungrily, and it was her hard fate to fill them.

"So absurd!" grumbled Lady Jim, as the wind whimpered and the rain lashed the glass, "in the middle ages one could have hired a nice bravo to put him out of the way, and there would not have been even funeral expenses. I must pay, I suppose, but I'll see if the beast will not take the money by instalments. There is always the chance that he might be drowned between payments--and I hope he will be," she ended devoutly.

In this amiable frame of mind she arrived at Curzon Street, after sending Joan, brimful of Continental experiences, to the less fashionable district of Lambeth. The house looked cosy, the servants were attentive, the insurance money swelled her bank account, and, best of all, Demetrius was posting towards Siberia. On the whole things were tolerable--it was not Leah's custom to indulge in superlatives--so she decided to remain for a week or two in London, prior to being bored at Firmingham, where the Marchioness awaited the home-coming of the yachting party. After her late efforts in the cause of politics Lady Jim felt that she really could not stand Hilda's artificial childishness without an intermezzo of amusement.

But fun of any sort was hard to find, since her widowhood and the emptiness of town precluded indulgence. Piccadilly and the Park, St. James's Street and Pall Mall, were as barren of pleasure and a fashionable population as that Siberia towards which Demetrius unwillingly journeyed. Even Lady Canvey had moved out of the Early Victorian room into more modern surroundings at Nice. Askew certainly paid his promised visit, but he proved to be dull, thinking more of the

yacht than the woman. The technical terms he employed in describing his purchase made Lady Jim yawn, and she decided that, like all men, he was unutterably selfish. However, she was sufficiently kind-hearted--and diplomatic--to show him the pseudo letter, and translate it for his benefit.

"Told you so," said he, when in possession of misleading facts: "the beggar's all right--be on his legs in a jiffy."

"Thanks to your care."

"Don't rub it into a fellow, Lady Jim!"

"Lady James!"

"Lady James it is, though it seems to me that we are to be merely acquaintances."

"Most of my friends are acquaintances."

"But I want this acquaintance to be a friend."

"What an exacting nature! Well"--with a sigh--"I suppose as you have loved and I have lost, we can be friends till you marry."

"Why not after?"

"Dear Mr. Askew, a bachelor selects his own friends, a wife chooses those of her husband. Meantime, you are a nice boy, if somewhat fickle, and I like you sufficiently to let you go. When does this ship of yours go south?"

"Schooner, Lady Jim--schooner-yacht; two hundred tons Lloyd's measurement and----"

"You explained that before."

"Did I? Yes, of course. Well, she is a beauty."

"Ah! The same term was applied to me once and by a man who said that he would love me for ever."

"I don't believe I was ever so crude," retorted Askew, bluntly; "you don't tell a lady that she is a beauty, though you might say it to a shopgirl."

"Really! I don't know any people of that class. You do, apparently."

The young man grew red and wriggled like a speared eel, thinking how very like a woman she was. She did not want him, and she did want him; she told him to go, and wished him to stop; she pardoned his fickleness, yet kept it in mind. "Ah, you bundle of contradictions!"

"Why not say a woman? One word explains your three."

"I like to be verbose," said Askew, sulkily.

"You always are--first about me, and then about this ship thing. I suppose the Fajardo woman will be the next."

"Don't speak of her like that."

"Why not? She is my rival. I should be more than mortal if I forgave her, and less than a woman if I did not say nasty things about her."

"Say them about me, then."

"I have been doing my best, and really, you take a ragging very well. There, poor boy"--she patted his cheek--"I shan't tease you any more. When do you sail?"

"In three weeks."

"For Buenos Ayres?"

"Of course."

"Oh true and eager lover! Dine with me next Thursday, and we can talk about her."

"You'll be nasty."

"About the ship? Oh, no!"

"I thought you meant Lola."

"Perhaps I did; both ship and woman are 'hers,' you know. Next Thursday?"

"I shall be delighted."

"You look it. Do try and conceal your emotions better."

Askew laughed, and took up his hat. She was more like a mosquito than a human being, and he made for the door, weary of being stung. "I would rather be your friend than your husband, Lady Jim," he said coolly.

"What a compliment, seeing what husbands are! I ought to know."

"Oh, pardon me--I forgot," he stuttered, much confused.

She shook her head at him gravely. "What a child in arms you are!"

To this last piece of impertinence Askew would have replied rather sharply, thereby proving the truth of her remark, but that the door was blocked by a tall lean man.

"M. Aksakoff!" announced the footman, behind the newcomer.

"Good-day, Lady James. Good-day, M. Aksakoff, and good-bye."

Leah, when alone with the diplomatist, felt her heart leap at the solemnity of his looks. She fancied that he might have come to tell her of the doctor's escape. In reality, Aksakoff was wondering how he could pay her two thousand pounds without turning the arranged comedy into a drama. Feeling his way, he allowed her the first word.

"You will stop to luncheon," said Lady Jim, amiably.

"I trespass too much on your hospitality, dear madame. You must have had enough of me at our last luncheon in Paris."

"Oh, I have forgotten all about Paris;" and she gave him a look which intimated that he also should feign forgetfulness.

"Ah, no; but pardon me, I came to inquire about M. Demetrius."

"Why from me? I know nothing. Wait--I do know something. He wrote me a letter saying he was better and intended to go to Russia."

"Probably to see Petrovitch about his pardon. I wish I had seen him before he left Paris;" and the diplomatist smiled when the letter was mentioned.

"Did you not see him?"

Aksakoff raised his eyebrows. "But it was impossible, madame," he explained, without even a wink. "Dr. Helfmann took him away in the fiacre and I departed for Havre. I did not return to Paris."

"I see; your business at Havre detained you."

"Longer than I expected," said the diplomatist, taking his cue. "You see, madame, I was forced to repeat my conversation with M. Demetrius to my cousin the Count. I expect that he wrote to Paris, and told M. Demetrius to come to Havre for a conversation."

"Without knowing his address? How clever!"

Aksakoff laughed. "You have me there, madame."

"I really don't know what you mean. How is Katinka?"

"She is at Brussels. In good health, I believe."

"Does she know that M. Demetrius has gone to St. Petersburg?"

"Possibly. He had to write announcing his engagement to you."

If he expected Lady Jim to be taken aback by this abrupt speech, he was mistaken in the woman, whose aplomb he should have known. She merely laughed and dropped out a ready lie with slow amusement. "Ah, my dear M. Aksakoff, clever linguists as you Russians are, your comprehension of the English language is limited--very, very limited. M. Demetrius should have known, that in our tongue, one word may have several meanings. See--a diocese. See--to perceive by the eye."

"Your illustration is felicitous, madame. I understand, then, that M. Demetrius translated 'No' as 'Yes'!"

"Oh, he was by no means so stupid as that. The man bothered me with attentions for months, and was quite a nuisance. I nearly spoke to poor dear Jim about his smirking, grinning compliments. He talked of me in clubs and followed everywhere, sighing like a furnace--if a furnace ever does sigh. I speak on Shakespeare's authority. To keep the creature quiet I said something which he apparently misconstrued--a sop to Cerberus, a cake to a child. You understand."

"I think so. There was no engagement."

"None at all. How impertinent of him to suggest such a thing, when my husband is scarcely cold in his grave! But I pardon him on account of his ignorance of our language, which undoubtedly led him into error. When I see him again I shall explain myself in a way which he will probably find disagreeable."

Aksakoff smiled imperceptibly. "M. Demetrius is much to blame, madame, for not having given more attention to your English grammar. I go to St. Petersburg myself in a week. Perhaps you will give me some message to him."

"No! The man is a fool, and I never wish to hear about him again."

"Your command shall be obeyed. From this moment his name shall never be mentioned by me," and he mentally admired the clever way in which she had wriggled out of an untenable situation. But the object of his visit had still to be approached, and at this moment an inspiration how to approach it came opportunely. The mention of poor dear Jim suggested lines upon which he might proceed with safety. "I come on a serious errand, madame," said he, softly.

"Yes!" she did not know what he meant, and under the circumstances did not intend to inquire. To advance under the guns of masked batteries was never Leah's mode of campaigning.

"Your husband--pardon, your late husband--played bridge," said the diplomatist, so crudely as to render himself unworthy of the name.

"I believe he did."

"Assuredly; and with me on occasions. Twelve months ago we were a party of five at Torquay."

"I believe Jim did go there sometimes. Go on."

"It is hard to go on, madame," said Aksakoff, with feigned nervousness, "as I have a confession to make."

"I grant you absolution beforehand."

"You are too good. Then I can repay you by handing over the money."

"What money?"

"My losses at bridge. Yes; with your husband and others I played a great deal--unfortunately for my pockets."

She noticed the misused plural and smiled. "Most people made that remark grammatically, when they played with Jim. So you lost?"

"Two thousand pounds."

The exact sum he had mentioned at Monte Carlo. At once she saw that he wished to pay wages on a sufficiently plausible pretext. The money would have been useful to pay Strange and Jim, so that she could keep her thirty thousand pounds intact; but, strangely enough in so unscrupulous a woman, she could not make up her mind to finger such dirty gold.

"Death pays all debts," she said quietly.

"On the part of the corpse, assuredly. But those who live have to reckon with the executors."

"In that case you had better see the Marquis of Frith. He is poor Jim's executor."

"Ah, no, madame; be kind. I should have paid this money before, but my salary did not permit. What would M. le Marquis say if I confessed that I delayed so long to pay a debt of honour?"

"What does it matter, so long as you do pay?"

"It matters much amongst men," said Aksakoff, stiffly. "But you, a woman, and a clever woman," he added with emphasis, "will understand. I pray you, madame, to take my cheque for the full amount, and permit my mind to be at rest."

Lady Jim, priding herself on performing a hard penance for her late rascality, shook her head. "No," said she, seriously; "I am quite sure that Jim, who was often in a hole himself, would not have been hard on you. Had he lived the money would have been a godsend to him--I admit that; but I really cannot take payment of any gambling debts. It would not be right," she finished virtuously.

Aksakoff was less surprised than she anticipated. Her refusal of this money assured him that the story of the engagement was true, and that Leah had rid herself of an undesirable suitor, who had power to compel completion of a forced contract. What power Demetrius had over her Aksakoff could not guess, but the whole circumstances showed that her desire had been for the obliteration of the man, and not to earn two thousand pounds. But nothing of this appeared on his calm face.

"Pray take the cheque, madame," he urged, and held it under her nose.

"No, no!" She pushed back her chair from that too alluring bait. "I cannot take it, and I shall say nothing about it. Stay"--she took the fluttering paper from his hand and rose. "You have paid me on Jim's behalf--is that not so?"

"Yes;" Aksakoff watched her, wondering at this right-about-face.

"Then"--she approached the fire and flung in the cheque--"the debt is paid, and you are free."

"Ah, but no."

"I say, yes." Lady Jim approached him with outstretched hands, and a smile which had won her many things. "You are my friend and not my debtor. Is it not so?"

He kissed those extended hands. "Madame, a hard-working and poor official thanks you. My services now and ever are at your command."

With the thought that Demetrius might return unexpectedly from Siberia, she thanked him. "I may have to remind you of that some day."

"When and where you will, madame!" His pale eyes lighted up with enthusiastic fire. "Were you my wife, I should be an ambassador."

"You may be some day. Madame Aksakoff has talents."

"Madame Aksakoff is--Madame Aksakoff; and you, are----"

"Well, what?" she demanded, smiling.

"An angel."

"How weak!"

"All language is weak, when used to describe such a woman as you, madame. I take my leave. Your servant!"

"And my friend?"

"To the death, madame!"

He went out as stiff and solemn as ever, with the conviction that he had parted from Jezebel's cousin-german. Nevertheless, he admired her prodigiously, especially as he intended to put into his own pockets the two thousand pounds she had so tactfully earned, and so foolishly rejected. The bureaucracy would never hear of her folly, and it would be a pity to return money which a poor official could bank against evil days. Not that Aksakoff expected these. The capture of Demetrius, without publicity, and so cleverly achieved, would gain him infinite credit as an efficient servant of the Czar. "A charming and astute woman," he thought gratefully, when ruminating on certain advancement. "But dangerous," added Prudence.

Leah went about for the next seven days with her head in the air, and with a contempt for those people who found renunciation difficult. She could renounce, with ease: had she not refused a large sum of money because she felt that it was wrong to take it? What self-denial! She felt aggressively virtuous, and but for the circumstances would have liked to trumpet her perfections in the street. That she did not do so was further self-denial and a flattering conscience, with which Providence had nothing to do, assured her that she was a pearl amongst women. Now that Demetrius was out of sight she calmly put him out of mind, and began to think how she could prevent Askew from spoiling Jim's nefarious courting of

the Spanish lady. There was no way, so far as she could see, since the sailor's love had grown cold, and she had no bonds in which to bind him. But she trusted to that luck which the fetish always sent her way, and sure enough the luck came, but some weeks later. Beforehand the fetish, still annoyed by her prayer to another god, sent her a reminder that it could be disagreeable. A bolt from the blue came in the shape of a telegram from Firmingham.

"Come to me at once," wired the Marchioness. "Yacht lost off Brest. Duke and Frith and most of crew drowned. Come."

"She might have spared the last word," said Leah, staring and stunned.

CHAPTER XXVI

Lady Jim boarded a special train to Firmingham in a royal rage, the more riotous for necessary suppression. After the shock of the unexpected had passed, she gave a flitting thought of pity to her drowned relatives, and reverted hastily to selfish considerations. Solitude permitting the play of temper, she punished the fetish, by flinging its outward and visible sign of a peacock's feather from the compartment which witnessed the unmasking. That her Baal should have played her such a trick was intolerable, and still more intolerable the thought that circumstances muzzled her. For the first time in her victorious life Leah Kaimes dealt with a fixed decree, against which there was no appeal.

What could she do? Nothing! To make chaos of a continent would not have relieved her feelings, and there was nothing to wreck in the limited space of the carriage. Unable to sit still, she threw herself from seat to seat, feeling like a caged tiger, with the added savagery of a trained intellect. Unlike the beast, she had the use of speech to vent her wrath, but this she did not utilise from a conviction that no words would do justice to the situation. A Texan mule-driver's

vocabulary would have fallen short of her requirements. Her impotent anger was like that of a dog leaping and slavering against an offending but unreachable moon.

And the facts--the hard ironic facts, which she could not do away with, scheme as she might! Those inflexible actualities buzzed in her brain, until repetition took the rhythm of the droning wheels underfoot. Pentland was dead, along with his son and heir; Hilda, a widow with two girl babies, who did not count in the succession; Jim was wiped out of social existence, and by her own act. Remained Lionel, the curate, the prig, her one honest man--the Duke of Pentland. Leah could have screamed in the face of this crushing truth.

A title at the best, fifty thousand a year, three country seats, a town house, spacious and crammed with beautiful things, and a Scotch moor with an adorable shooting-box. This was the heritage of the new peer! "Of a milk-and-water parson," raged Lady Jim, unjustly, "who will waste everything in charity, and turn the houses into pigsties for the unclean. Oh, Lord, to think that such a clerical ass should get the inside runnings!" This latter phrase she had picked up from Miss Mulrady, and at the moment it seemed expressive.

The position would not bear thinking about; yet she had to think, appealing betweenwhiles to the gods-of-things-as-they-are for reasons to justify such shabby treatment. What had she done, that they should be so disagreeable? It was enough to make a truly virtuous woman, as she assuredly could call herself, dance a can-can in Piccadilly. Then she desisted for a few moments from calling the Unseen bad names to lament over her own short-sightedness. To think that she should have sold Jim's birthright for thirty thousand pounds! It was not even one year's income of the Pentland estates. She would have been a Duchess, too; not that she personally cared for rank, but with a higher position she could have trampled the more easily on her enemies. A thought of these flashing into her mind made her clench her fists and grit her teeth. How they would rejoice, the beasts, to think what she had missed, and by how short a period she had missed it! If they had only one neck, as Caligula desired for his enemies, how she would have enjoyed a chop at it!

"Oh!" cried Leah, banging the cushions and choking in the dust thus raised--"if I could only bring Jim back!"

It was a kindly wish, as she desired him to enjoy the good things that had fallen into his sham grave. But there did not seem much chance of achieving the impossible. Jim was dead and buried, and the interment had been legally sanctified by her tears. If he came to life it would be difficult to explain how a corpse in his name came to occupy a niche in the Kaimes vault. Also, inquiry might lead to the production of a Siberian exile. If Demetrius told the truth--which he assuredly would do in the face of a betrayal he must guess was her work--there would be no place for her in Society, and she would starve, a social Peri at the gates of a forbidden Paradise. No! Think as she would--and think she did till her brain ached--things had to remain as she had foolishly arranged them. It was a galling thought to think that none but she who suffered was responsible. She could not even lay the blame on the stars; but she could and did on the fetish. It was something of a relief to have thrown its peacock manifestation out of the window.

Two hours in the railway carriage tamed her unruly nerves into some sort of submission, and partially schooled her into accepting the inevitable. To make the best of it, to rob the new Duke shamelessly of money and the Curzon Street house, on the plea of disinheritance, were the results at which she arrived. By the time Firmingham appeared through the carriage windows she had ceased to kick against the pricks. The mask was on her face when the train stopped, and it was a quiet and demure lady who alighted at the station. Even the sister-in-law who entered the great house to console the Marchioness was as sympathetic as the most exacting could have required.

She suppressed a groan when she passed through the doors of the lordly mansion that was really and truly her own, but managed by a steady exercise of her strong will to greet Colley with great calmness. The butler intimated that Lady Frith wept incessantly in her boudoir, and that the Duke----

"What?" queried Leah, sharply, adding more grammatically, "Who?"

"His Grace the Duke, my lady. He is in the study."

"Mr. Lionel Kaimes?"

"As was, my lady. His Grace came down last night."

"Augh! Why wasn't there an accident on the line?" muttered she, who longed to announce herself as a genuine duchess and could not.

"I beg pardon, my lady!"

"Oh--er--I'll go to my room, Colley. Tell his Grace I shall see him in an hour."

When she had changed her dress for one heavier with crape, as a sign of additional grief, and had lain for a miserable forty minutes without closing an eye, and had swallowed a much-needed dose of sal volatile, and had relieved her feelings by scolding an unoffending maid, she went before the footlights to play her most difficult and unpalatable part. The former nobody, seated at his predecessor's desk, rose, looking pale and careworn.

"A terrible thing," said the new Duke, giving his hand gravely.

"Awful. I can scarcely believe it. Is it really true?" and she had a passing hope that it might not be, seeing she could not benefit.

"Only too true, unfortunately."

"For those two, I suppose you mean. You're all right."

"A square peg in a round hole, I fear," he sighed. "I would give much that both had survived."

"How unnatural!" commented Lady Jim, with a grimace. "But you always were eccentric. People won't mind that, now you are a duke. But I am sorry--really--for them, I mean. Such an awful thing to be cut off before you've made your arrangements for an agreeable reception in the next world. What a mercy they went together--for company, you know; and they say drowning is really quite nice after the first choking is over."

Lionel looked at her sternly, but felt helpless. She played with the solemn issues of life and death as a child with a bauble. Would nothing touch her heart? Would nothing make her serious? The flippancy jarred on his overstrung nerves. "Please do not talk like that," said he, harshly and emphatically. "Please do not."

"I am only trying to cheer you up," she answered, opening her eyes wide, and with a faint smile softening her hard mouth. "I really cried--you mustn't think me hard-hearted; really, I cried when I heard of the accident. I suppose it was an accident?"

"I should call it the act of God."

"Oh!" Leah could find no very pertinent reply, and glided dexterously into another subject, to prevent religious instruction. "I came down to see poor Hilda, as she wanted me so badly. But I thought it best to learn details from you first. We must spare the poor thing's feelings, you know, Lionel," ended Lady Jim, thoughtfully.

His face brightened. "I am glad you call me that," said he, earnestly, "for I confess it is difficult for me to respond to my title."

"You'll get used to it," she assured him. "I suppose you will drop the parson now?"

"Certainly not. I am still my Master's servant. He has merely raised me to a higher and more responsible position in His household."

"Raised your wages also," murmured Leah, shrugging. "I beg your pardon, Lionel, I should not have said that."

"You should not, indeed," was the pained response.

"It's a kind of hysteria," apologised Lady Jim, almost at a loss for an excuse, "like that man who botanised on his mother's grave, you know. Besides, people who really feel, laugh awfully when sorrow comes. And Jim's death took most of my tears--poor dear Jim! I daresay you think that I am unfeeling; but I'm not--really and truly, I'm not. What with these dear things dying so unexpectedly, and my own feeling of widowhood, and condolences from people who will say the wrong thing, I feel broken-hearted."

Lionel smiled grimly at this incoherent and wholly false explanation.

"You have a strange way of showing grief, Lady James."

"Don't be nasty, now that you are up in the world. I'll be quite different with Hilda, poor soul, though I must be natural with you. It is a compliment, if you only look at it in the right way, which of course, with your priggishness, you won't. And you needn't use that cheap title of mine, just to remind me how nearly I've missed being called by a more expensive one. I suppose Joan will be your duchess. Do you think she will fill the position!"

"Admirably."

"How curt! There is still a lot of the parson about you, Lionel."

"And ever will be."

"World without end, I suppose. Hysteria again, Duke, so don't look shocked. Give me details."

The young man looked again at this wonderful being. For many months he had known the impossibility of altering Leah's view of things seen and unseen. The most sacred subjects seemed to appeal to her sense of humour, and no solemnity could banish the ever-ready smile from her lips. In reality he was unjust in thinking thus. Lady Jim, considering her losses and the ironic position she occupied, only kept herself from shrieking out the truth by giving vent to ill-timed frivolities. Her greatest relief would have been to tell this prig that he was a supplanter. Hysteria, said she, was the excuse for unnatural merriment, and truly hysteria it was, although she could not swear to it. Unaware of all this turmoil in the mind of the mourner in motley, Lionel positively thought that troubles had rendered her distraught, and so passed over her incongruities.

"The yacht was on her homeward way," he explained, in the eminently laboured fashion of a landsman when dealing with ships. "During that storm a week ago she went down off Brest--Cape Brest."

"Struck on a reef?"

"No; she sprang a leak, and the boats were stove in, so no one could be saved in that way. By clinging to a spar the steward reached shore. He alone survived;" and Lionel covered his face to indulge in a silent prayer for those who had perished.

Lady Jim was more practical according to her lights. "Why did you only hear this week-old news yesterday?"

"The steward, the survivor, was ill with fever: also he was wounded in the head,--against the rock, I suppose. The yacht was seen to founder far off shore, but no one at Brest knew her name. When the steward came to himself the other day, he explained, and the news was telegraphed to the Duke's lawyers, who sent for me. I expect we shall not learn full details till this steward arrives. He is now on his

way to London."

"And the Duke--Frith?"

"Their bodies are in the depths with the ship and those who formed her crew. Peace be to their souls!"

"You needn't worry about that," said Leah, tartly, and paying her tribute to the dead. "I am quite sure that the Duke and Frith have gone to that heaven you're always talking about. It is awful," she added pensively, and with a shudder; "but talking only makes it worse. I'll go and see Hilda, poor dear."

Lionel followed her to the door. "Lady James, let me beg of you to keep the--er--hysteria in check."

"Of course," she assured him, giving her hand frankly; "I always adapt my mood to my company. It would be useless for one woman to waste hysteria on another--both know too much about it. I'll be nice--oh, you can be sure of that. I'm not a bad sort, my good man."

"Sometimes I think you are a very decent sort, Lady James."

"And on other occasions?" she questioned, unmoved.

"Don't ask me."

"I won't. You can't explain, and will only fib. Parsons can't keep back an answer, whether they know anything of the matter in hand or not. But I'll be good to that poor baby-woman--indeed I will."

And indeed she was, swinging round to the opposite extreme, with the protean adaptability of her nature. Besides, after the interview with the new Duke she felt able to command her feelings better. It is only possible to act perfectly when the emotions are under control, as Lady Jim found; and if she said what she did not mean, and acted as she did not feel, well, that was the fault of the circumstances into which her treacherous fetish had thrown her. But at heart she really had some pity for this useless doll of a woman, who sobbed in her arms.

"Don't cry, dear," said Leah, ardently, beginning to console; "you know how I feel for you. I also have lost a husband." Owing to circumstances she rather

choked over this lie, but it came out pretty readily.

"I shall never--never lift up my head again," sobbed the latest widow.

"Oh, yes, you will, dear," replied the earlier one, cheerfully: "look at me!"

Hilda shook her head and declined to look. "Frith wasn't Jim," said she.

"And he wasn't my husband, either. You feel Frith's death and I feel Jim's. We each have our own sorrow, and time alone will help us to forget the dear departed."

"Leah"--Hilda sobbed more violently than ever--"I shall never--never forget. Never--never--never--never!"

"I didn't mean forget exactly," murmured Leah, who had been more candid than she intended; "but time will soothe us, and we shall all meet on a happier shore."

"I hope so--I hope so;" the Marchioness clasped her hands devoutly and raised her eyes. "I can see our three dear ones meeting now."

"I wish I could," said Lady Jim, truthfully, and she felt that the meeting of the Kaimes family in heaven would be a sight worth witnessing. Of course Jim was alive, but even if he were dead, she did not think that Hilda's vision could possibly become fact. The Duke, who had turned angel in his old age, and Frith, who was always pious, had a chance certainly; but Jim, when his turn came, would probably not be of the party.

However, the business of consoling a sore heart had to be attended to, and Leah dosed Hilda with all the platitudes which the Marchioness had used during a similar and earlier event. And Lady Jim was so admirable an actress that she really deceived herself into thinking that her stage-play was real life. Her eloquence, her attentions, her hoverings like a guardian angel over Hilda, her bringing in the children--that was a master-stroke--and her general zeal in drying a mourner's tears, were truly wonderful. By the time she left the Marchioness, sitting up with "his children" on her lap, soothed and comforted, and grateful for Leah's kindness, poor Lady Jim felt quite exhausted.

"I do hope there will be a decent dinner," she soliloquised, in the seclusion of her own room. "I can't stand much more of this without food."

Through the troubles of death and the joys of birth, the worry of weak minds and the scheming of strong ones, ever moves the solid business of life connected with eating and sleeping. Therefore the Firmingham cook, being a hired servant, was sufficiently master of his emotions to send up a really tempting repast. The new Duke and the disinherited Duchess partook of this meal in a small room without attendance. Wishing to talk family matters, they did not desire eavesdropping footmen. Besides, Hilda remained in her own apartment, nourishing her emotions with red lavender, and calling at intervals for "Bunny" to come back. Lady Jim paid several visits to the poor little soul during the evening, and each time was successful in cheering her up; but it was trying work, as again and again she had to begin from the beginning. No wonder she looked harassed when seated opposite to her host. Lionel thanked her gratefully, and with reason, for Hilda had eulogised Leah and her work of mercy.

"I knew you would prove yourself a true woman," said he, pouring her out a glass of champagne.

"Oh, Lord!" said Lady Jim, sipping the wine, and wondered what he would say could he see into her mind. "Give me some of that vol-au-vent, Lionel. It is really very good."

The man felt slightly disappointed. "You can eat?"

"Do you require me to tell you that?" she asked lightly. "I have enjoyed every course. Eat--I should think so. You don't want me to faint, as Hilda has been doing."

"But your feelings"

"Oh, they are well under control, now. And after all"--Leah paused with a fork half-way to her mouth--"it's best to be sensible even when things smash. If I had come down to howl about the house, where would you have been?"

"I really cannot understand your nature."

Lady Jim nodded. "Same here. I never know what I shall do under given circumstances, save keep my poor wits about me. We're strange beasts, Lionel--strange beasts."

He disagreed, mindful of her Good Samaritan kindness. "You make yourself out to be worse than you are, Lady James."

"Don't you make any such mistake. I never seek cheap praise by crying down my virtues. Were you my father-confessor--which you are not--and I religious--which I have no inclination to be--I should shock you into Hilda's state. Poor little thing, what an undisciplined mind she has, and how she does work for those tyrants the emotions! I think you had better send for Joan: she is used to women who run wild."

"You put things unpleasantly," said he, uneasily.

"And truthfully. Answer my question, please."

"Joan arrives to-morrow with her mother."

"I am glad," Leah assured him fervently. "Too many female cooks can never spoil the funeral broth. The more women you have in a mourning house the better. We like to weep in company and to talk obituary notices. That is, other women do. I fancy I have a dash of the man in me, and this sort of undertaker rejoicing gives me the creeps."

Lionel secretly agreed with her, although he disapproved of the mode of expression. Ostentatious grief he disliked, as most men do, and discussing funeral emotions threadbare was not to his healthy liking. Therefore did he talk business with Lady Jim. It was necessary to distract his attention, she said, and so set about plundering the heir. By the time coffee arrived Lionel had promised her the Curzon Street house as a gift, and had agreed to pay all debts as the late Duke had arranged. Also, untruthfully assured by Leah that her temporal prosperity had suffered by the untimely demise of Jim, he promised to pay a quarterly thousand a year for the rest of her life.

"Yes," said Lionel, emphatically, "even if you marry, Lady James."

"I have no intention of marrying yet," said Leah, who was busy with Kümmel. She really felt that the consoling of a tearful widow required Kümmel.

"I thought that Mr. Askew admired you."

"He admires a new schooner he has bought, and some woman in South America. Oh, Mr. Askew has a catholic mind, I can tell you."

"Dr. Demetrius!"

"He has gone to Russia, I believe, on business connected with his pardon. Didn't Joan tell you how he was taken ill in Paris?"

"Yes; what a strange thing!"

"Oh, I don't know. He once told me that he inherited fits--mother's side. It was very rude of him to have one in my rooms, but some men are so inconsiderate."

"He loves you."

"Or loved me--which?"

"Present tense, I fancy. Will you marry him?"

"Will I marry the Emperor of China, you mean. No, thanks; I have no wish to live in a country of bounce and bombs. And I never could read those novels written by men with unpronounceable names. Besides, I can't bear dapper little men with waxed moustaches. I only tolerated Dr. Demetrius because he was useful to Jim."

"A great friend of your husband's, I believe."

"Do you? Does one generally make a friend of one's doctor?"

"The man was certainly credited with being your friend. And more, he talked openly of his love for you."

"What bad taste! I don't see how you can hold me responsible. He did love me, I believe--at least, he pestered me with attentions. It's a mercy he has gone to Si--I mean to Russia. I hope he'll stay there, and be eaten up by white bears like those poor brats Elisha was so spiteful to. As to marrying"--her eyes twinkled--"it won't be easy to replace poor Jim. He was such a good husband."

"You never said that when he was alive."

"Of course not: he would have taken advantage of the compliment. But Jim wasn't bad on the whole. He left me alone, at all events. Perhaps his successor will bother me to show public affection: as if I would--or could, for the matter of that."

"Lady James, do you love any one but yourself?"

"You and Joan--dear little innocent glass-case dolls that you are. Yes; you may blush and smile, but I am really in earnest. You were always so rude to me that I knew you to be genuine."

"Oh!" Lionel exhibited shocked surprise. "I hope I was never rude."

"Horribly, on all occasions. If you had not been, I never should have believed that you were genuine. When people mean what they say, and don't want

anything from one, they are always rude; it's a kind of trademark. I am sure Socrates was a man you could always trust and would never have invited to dinner. You're something like him, only you don't ask questions and are better-looking. I always consider you the one honest man in a world of rogues, and if you were not engaged to Joan, I should marry you."

Lionel coloured still deeper and laughed in an embarrassed fashion. "I might have something to say to that."

"Not at all. Didn't you hear me say that I should have married you. What could you or any man do against me?" and she laughed with an insolent pride in her beauty and powers. "By the way," she added, "I have to run up to town tomorrow on business. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Joan and her mother will be here. Do exactly what you please, Lady James."

"Call me Leah, now that you are the head of the family," she murmured, and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

He threw back his head and met her eyes, with a boyish blush. "Leah!" he breathed. "Very well, then--Leah."

Lady Jim tapped his smooth cheek indulgently. "You foolish thing," she said, kindly; "if it was worth my while, I could----" Leaving the sentence unfinished and Lionel furious, she left the room. That she--this hardened coquette of the world, should dare to think he would forget the sweetest and best of girls. Let her sing the song of the sirens as she might, he would never--no, never, prove false to Joan. But honest as were these thoughts, Lionel was but a man, when all was said and done, and the touch on his shoulder, the look in her eyes, the cooing murmur of her voice, made him wince, and not unpleasantly. Well was it for the young man that Leah did not choose to try her wiles, else he might have been lured towards that pit the edges of which are wreathed with roses. Had his future Duchess been any other than Joan the simple, a perverse spirit might have led Lady Jim to indulge in some perilous amusement; but she liked the girl, and honestly respected Lionel. Therefore did the lover scoff at her magic arts, strong only in escaping temptation. Had Leah put forth her powers---- "Silly little donkey," she thought, climbing the stairs, "as if I couldn't do what I liked. It would be a hard battle, but I could--I could--I could,--only I shan't," she finished.

"Joan is a dear girl, and I am the most worried woman in the world."

She made the latter part of this final remark again, when she conned a brusque and somewhat imperative letter which had arrived by the evening post. It came from one Richard Strange, and purported to be written from a third-rate Strand hotel. This uncivilised communication intimated that the aforesaid Strange would be obliged--this underlined--if her ladyship would afford him an immediate interview.

"M'm," commented Leah, glancing suspiciously at the underlined word, "he isn't sure of his money, and means to be nasty if he doesn't get it. Well"--she heaved a sigh--"he must be paid, I suppose, the blackmailing beast. And the whole sum down, I expect. Time payments won't be acceptable to a man who writes in this fashion."

She wrote an artful letter, stating that Dr. Demetrius had spoken of his travels with a Captain Strange, and, solely because she wished to hear of poor Mr. Garth, who had been a protégé of her late father-in-law, she made an appointment at 10, Curzon Street, for five the next evening. This epistle, which did not recognise existing facts and could be shown to the whole world without betraying anything underhand, she sent off at once. If possible, she would have shirked meeting a man she more than suspected of being a brute. But to vanquish danger one must meet it, as she very well knew.

"And if he wants more than his thousand," thought Lady Jim, again on her way to the widowed Marchioness, "he'll find that I am quite equal to deal with him, and with a dozen like him, if need be. A thousand pounds! Oh, Lord! The greedy wretch!"

Then she spread her wings as a ministering angel.

CHAPTER XXVII

"No!" rasped the lean man, and his eyes hardened like those of a cat with her claws out; "you figure it out, ma'am, in your own way very prettily, I don't deny. But my Pisgah-sight's got to be took, you bet. Guess we'll do th' view in a bunch, an' toss fur lots."

Leah smiled vaguely, because she was not sure of her ground, and required a translator badly. Jim had been abstruse on occasions, but this seafaring person spoke the shibboleth of a shifting population to excess. Never having met one of this breed before, she did not know how to handle him. Captain Strange was not a Muscovite diplomatist, who would call black white, or even grey, to please her; and, moreover, he appeared to be extraordinarily unsympathetic in the presence of lovely woman. The magic of sex had worked weakly hitherto, and this brusque visitor gave her to understand that he was not to be cajoled into make-believe conversation. He required, and declared emphatically that he did require, an unvarnished statement of facts, to be argued exhaustively, so that he might know--as he tersely put it--where he dropped anchor.

"You don't chuck orange-peel my way, ma'am," said the mariner, and intended to clinch his assertion by spitting. But the sight of the carpet pulled him back to civilisation.

The friend of Demetrius, owner and captain of the *Stormy Petrel*, presented himself as a tall, small-boned man, with no superfluous flesh on his frame-work, and with a jaw as hard--from bullying underlings--and as blue--from close shaving--as were his eyes. The tint of these, added to the blackness of curling hair, combined with the racy vernacular which he flung fairly in her face, inclined Lady Jim to class him as an Irish-American. But from the discourteous way in which he spoke--as they never would have spoken in dear dirty Dublin--and from his habit of interjecting slang words chosen from the domestic speech of the Five Nations, she was puzzled to fix his nationality accurately. As a matter of private history, and this she discovered later, he was entirely cosmopolitan, and, out of sheer contrariety, owed allegiance to no particular flag. Not a bad-looking freebooter, Leah decided, with his regular features, and well-shaped head, and white teeth, and ruddy clean-shaven face; but dangerous, was her second and wiser thought. She was right. The man of many lands was also of many minds, but at the back of them all lay the unalterable determination to ride

rough-shod over any one who would submit. As Lady Jim also held to the same theory of individualism, it was not unlikely that a brisk encounter might ensue, and for this she was quite prepared. Meantime, she decided that he was picturesque, and, in his rough blue clothes, with a red neck-tie and barbaric gold rings in his ears, and a general air of "you-be-damnedness," would have amused her as a new figure from the underworld, but that the large issues of the conversation induced seriousness.

"I don't understand you, and I am sure you do not understand me," was her observation, after digesting the orange-peel parable.

"Let it go at that, ma'am. But I reckon I kin make m'self as clear as any man, livin' or dead, when dollars are in th' pool. Now you"--he shook a large brown finger--"you, ma'am, give me taffy."

"What is taffy?"

"What you might call sugar--best brand, an' no sand in it, anyhow. I've struck heaps of the female in my time, and it's all taffy with them, till they annex the outfit, an' then y' kin go hang, I guess;" he fixed her with a true quarter-deck eye. "I surmise as you're tryin' t' play Sally Waters low down. Not much--oh, no. I should smile considerable to think as any gilded female got th' bulge on me. Go slow, ma'am. Make no haste when the fat's afire, ses Isaiah. Beckon he knew things, did thet prophet."

Leah smiled again at this Wild West outburst. "You are a free child of nature, Captain Strange."

"Taffy agin. I'm a man, you bet, same along as your husband."

"I should think you and he would get on together extremely well," said Lady Jim, dryly. "But don't you think you could contrive to be a little less rude?"

"Why, bless y', this is civil fur me."

"How your crew must love you!"

"I'd boot 'em round the ship if they didn't," snapped Strange, very ferociously. "They've got t' love me up t' the level of workin' their insides out, else I'd lay out every man jack in his little wooden overcoat."

"What a sweet nature you have! Are you married?"

"Got a wife o' sorts," said the mariner, indifferently, "an' two kids of th' best." His eyes softened. "Now, ma'am, you could talk t' me fur a millennium 'bout them little nippers."

The last word was pure Whitechapel, and Leah wondered if that parish could claim this buccaneer. But time was too valuable to go into his private history, so she replied gently, quick to perceive that there was a flaw in his armour, "On another occasion I shall be delighted to talk nursery, Captain Strange; but the millennium has not yet arrived in Curzon Street."

"Y've got me there, I don't deny," cried Strange, hardening. "Now this here racket, as I've sailed long-sides t' fix up----"

"It will be fixed up, as you call it, at once," said Lady Jim, sharply. "The matter is very simple."

"Is it now? Lay on th' paint, ma'am."

She passed over this insolence very wisely. "You were kind to that poor Mr. Garth," she explained, calmly. "And, besides, took Dr. Demetrius to my husband in Jamaica. For these services I am willing to give you one thousand pounds--in gold, if you like;" she thought the metal might tempt him into closing with the offer, but it did not.

"Shucks, ma'am, shucks! You've bin talkin' paint an' putty fur th' las' hour an' more. T'ain't no good nohow--not a bit, seein' as I'm being paid fur cold-drawn kidnappin' of your husband, so as y might loot a company of sorts."

Leah winced at this rude blast of speech, which blew to shreds the verbal draperies with which she was trying to clothe naked and unpleasant facts. "I object to the word kidnap. Lord James went with you of his own accord."

"You kin lay to that, ma'am, an' mighty spry wos he in lightin' out of these gilded halls int' the free an' wild. Kidnappin' it ain't, if y' come t' th' bone, so I climb down slick. Oh, there ain't no meanness 'bout me, ma'am. Prove me wrong, an' I go pious right along."

"As you are apparently pious now, Captain Strange, there may be a chance of our arriving at an understanding."

He nodded. "If as how you'll talk down t' th' bed-rock level of what we've bin doin', ma'am."

Leah winced again, not liking to run with this ruffian in iniquitous harness. "You want a thousand pounds?"

"Well," drawled the captain, "y' might say fairer than thet."

"Which means that you intend to ask for what you won't get."

"Huh! Guess thet'll be as right as pie, when I open out."

"You can open out now," said Lady Jim, coolly.

Her antagonist admired this bluffing to the extent of slapping his thigh, and chuckling like a blackbird over a worm. "You're a dandy one t' deal with, fur sure, an' a woman at that. My word"--this was Australian--"if my missus hed bin your sort, ma'am, I'd ha' bin walkin' a liner as a golden-barred skipper. You kin freeze on t' thet, straight."

Lady Jim laughed, not ill pleased. Aksakoff had paid her some such compliment, and it was interesting to see the diverse ways in which the same idea can be expressed. "Go on," said she, nodding her thanks.

"Don't waste chin-music, neither," mused the captain. "Want's t' git at my cards afore she shows her own."

"You are in the right so far, Captain Strange"

"Talks book English like print. If she ain't a queen of dimins an' hearts I'm----"

"I have no doubt you will be some day," interposed Leah, before he could get the word out; "but until you are, suppose you--er--open out."

"Touchin' the passage money, as you might call it in a high-falutin' way, ma'am?"

"Passage money for my husband?"

"An' fur a double of his, as negotiated the Noo Jerusalem on th' v'yge," nodded the captain, extending his long legs. "Then there's th' man we planted at Funchal."

"Your nephew--buried in place of Mr. Garth."

"Nephew! Oh, he wasn't any relative o' mine."

"Dr. Demetrius informed me that he was."

"Huh! Guess he wos filled up with thet idear by me. Yes, ma'am, I reckoned t' make more dollars by supplyin' a nevy as a corp. But he wos a pick-up, bless y', racketin' off chain, withouter friend, wife, or kid, till I help plant him in Madeira."

"Will inquiries be made about him?" she asked, carelessly.

"Y' make me smile some, ma'am. Why, I picked up a stray dog o' purpose."

"H'm!" said Leah, lying back comfortably; "it would have been better for your pocket had you withheld this information until you cashed my cheque. It will make a difference."

"Goin' t' cut int' th' thousand?" asked Strange, blandly.

"He was not your nephew, remember," she retorted. The mariner stared and chuckled. "Donner und Blitz!"

"I know German, if you prefer to talk in that tongue."

He recovered with another stare. "I reckon y've hed a board-school eddication all along th' line. I swear in any lingo handy----"

"So I hear," she informed him swiftly.

"But I don't stock furrein chin-chin nowhow. An' now, ma'am"--he expanded his chest and puffed out his cheeks--"I'll trouble y' t' han' over ten thousand dollars."

"What's that in English?"

"Two thousand pounds." Evidently Strange had gone to considerable trouble in calculating his blackmail.

"And if you do not get it?"

"Then I guess you'll be sent up."

Leah laughed scornfully. "I understand: unless I submit to extortion you will tell this story about your supposed nephew and Mr. Garth."

"I'll rip out everything" the captain assured her without flinching; "an' t' th' nearest copper"--the last word, she observed, was popular cockney.

"Be careful," she warned him; "our police make capital out of rascality."

The sailor choked and his eyes bulged. "Ras--ras--rascality?"

"Blackmail, in plain English, Captain Strange."

"Naow don't git me riz," Strange implored her. "I'm a holy terror with m' hair off."

"Oh, we can tame wild beasts in this country."

"But if I tell----"

"Tell what?"

"Damn!" breathed the astonished man; then almost shrieked an explanation: "Why, thet Dr. Demetrius brought Garth as a corp t' Kingston, an' yanked your husband int' the Blue Mountains t' sham death. Aye; he did, y' bet. An' thet Berrin'--Lord James, y' call him in your cussed fine way--come aboard my barkey, while the corp as was called by his name lighted out fur th' old country, so thet y' might run rings round a company of sorts."

"How interesting! And what has it all to do with me?"

"My stars!" Strange rose to stamp the more freely.

"Sit down, please," said Lady Jim, sweetly. "I do not allow people of your class to show their manners in my drawing-room."

"It should be a prison with you in it," he raged. "What a brute you are! Because you think that I am under your thumb, you not only attempt blackmail, but add insult."

"I'll make things hum, I kin tell y'. I'll bust up this conspiracy."

"What conspiracy?" asked Leah, stubbornly.

Strange made for the door with a nautical roll. "You kin arsk th' nearest copper. I'll give him details, never fear."

"Close the door after you, please," said Lady Jim, as he wrenched it open fiercely.

The captain immediately banged it again with a naughty word, and turned to behold her opening a book. "Cold-drawn cheek of th' mos' freezing style," murmured the almost stupefied man. "Oh, my country, t'aint no wonder he took leg-bail. If I was married t' her I'd larrup her every day an' twice on Sundays."

"Not gone yet?" inquired Leah, glancing over the top of her book. "Oh, please do! I dislike hearing an illiterate person muttering."

"Lord keep me fro' murder," gasped Strange, piously. "Say, ma'am, ain't you afeared?"

"Awfully! And as there are several policemen within call----"

"Bring 'em up--bring 'em all up, right along."

"I will, if you do not go away;" and she reached for the bell.

"Snakes! Y' mus' hev a card up your sleeve."

"Perhaps I have."

"Or y' may be bluffin'."

"Perhaps I am. Don't you think it would be better if you sat down and talked pleasantly?"

"If I'd a wife like you," commenced the captain, obeying, "I'd----"

"I am quite sure you would. Bullies like you always enjoy wife-beating."

"I ain't a bully;" he wiped his face with a flaunting red bandana handkerchief, breathing heavily.

"Yes, you are, and a coward, who thought to frighten me. Now I am about to frighten you."

"Huh!" Strange laughed scornfully. "There ain't man, woman, or kid kin make me sing small. Though I don't deny," he added gracefully, "as you'd make Old Nick squirm."

"Thanks, but I am rather tired of costermonger compliments. Come to business. You accuse me of being mixed up in a conspiracy?"

"Well, an' ain't it true?"

"As gospel, between ourselves. To the world it is a lie."

"I bet you can't prove 'tis so," sneered the sailor.

"Proof is not required. Denial is."

"Not when I'm in th' witness-box."

"Not when you're in the dock, you mean, my good man."

Her visitor grew purple. "Me--in th' dock!" he thundered.

"Lower your voice, please, or I shall order my servants to turn you out. Yes--in the dock, your natural place. This conspiracy of yours."

"Engineered for your little game, mind," he gasped.

"Not at all. I have nothing to do with it;" her hard eyes held him as he blankly considered her astonishing impudence. "You tell me that Dr. Demetrius buried a man at Funchal in place of Mr. Garth, and then, when Mr. Garth died on board your ship, sent home his body as that of my husband. As Mr. Garth and my husband resembled one another closely, I can see how I and the family were mistaken when we beheld the substituted corpse. But I do not understand why

my husband should have consented to this, no more than I understand how you dare accuse me of conspiring."

"But I do, you bet, ma'am. You played low down on a company."

"Where is your proof?"

"You've got the dollars."

She played a bold stroke. "Ignorant that the money was paid under false pretences. It shall be given back."

Strange turned white and jumped up. "My share!" he cried.

"I know nothing of your share. Apparently, Dr. Demetrius, who happened to--to--er--admire me, kidnapped my husband in order that I might think myself free to marry him,--a thing," said Lady Jim, with scorn, "which could never--never have occurred. It seems that my husband was taken away by you and Dr. Demetrius against his will. I shall communicate with him, now that I know he is alive. Oh, I assure you, search shall be made, Captain Strange, and the money--every penny--shall be paid back to the defrauded insurance company. As for you--blackmailing hound and bully and coward, the law shall punish you;" and she, daring greatly, was again about to touch the bell.

Several times during this clever explanation Strange had gasped and sworn softly, almost helpless with rage. But by the time she ended his anger had cooled, and he was regarding her with profound admiration. Her astonishing boldness, her dexterous turning of facts into fiction and fiction into facts, and the unbroken nerve which she displayed when at bay, commanded his respect. Unknowingly he fell into line with M. Aksakoff, and rendered homage to superior wickedness.

"Don't shoot, colonel, I'll climb down," said he, collapsing.

Lady Jim, knowing the old 'possum story, laughed and withdrew her hand, secretly relieved that he had not dared her to press the button. "Ah, now you talk reason, Captain Strange."

"You bet I'm goin' to," he retorted bluntly. "Y've played your hand fur all you're worth, an' mighty prettily bluffed it is. But I guess"--he swung back in his chair largely--"I guess I hold the ace."

"You do?" She eyed him uneasily, for he appeared to be much cooler than she approved of. "And the ace?"

"Your husband."

"Jim!" Leah started forward, grasping the arms of her chair.

"Huh!" grunted Strange. "I thought you gilded bummers were allays lords an' ladies t' one another."

"Jim!" she repeated blankly. "Jim!"

"You bet. Kidnappin' was th' word I used, an' kidnappin' it is. Thet there Berrin', your husband, sailin' under false colours, come along with me to Buenos Ayres--there's no denying thet. But"--here the freebooter winked significantly--"he didn't git set ashore there. Oh no, not much, you bet. I gummed on t' him as m' ace till I landed stakes. He don't mind, bless y'--likes the life wonderful. We've bin gavortin' round Pacific waters fur months, till the dollars ran low. Then I brought the barkey nor'ard with him under hatches, and naow"--he stretched out a huge paw--"y' kin pass along thet ten thousand."

Her brain was working so hard that she scarcely heard half the speech. At the back of it she began to see possibilities. "My husband is in England, then?"

"Within reach, anyhow, and with my first mate hangin' on t' him. Maybe the barkey anchors in a French port. Might be Spanish fur choice, if y' like--there's no knowin'. But he's within hail, same as them coppers of yours. The ace, ma'am, the ace. Y' might put in a day arskin' me why I let him go at ten thousand dollars. Th' hull shoot is worth heaps an' heaps more."

Leah watched his face closely. "Worth five thousand pounds, perhaps?"

"Well," he drawled, equally watchful; "I shouldn't mind goin' nap on that, all things being on th' square. Naow if----"

"Wait! Wait, I tell you!" She clasped her hands across her forehead and paced the room with slow steps, which did not betray the nervous hurry of her overwrought brain.

Strange watched her, as a naturalist might watch an entirely new animal. Clever and hard as he was in his bullying way, he felt instinctively that he had little chance of getting the better of this woman, unless--as he phrased it--he kept his tail up. "She's the dandiest devil I ever sot eyes on," was his admiring verdict. "Golly, wot a flyer! Huh!"

Lady Jim, twisting her hands distressfully, strolled slowly up and down, with bent head and thoughtful looks. At times she would halt and reflect deeply; then her face would brighten as she resumed her prowling. Sometimes she glanced at Strange, sitting like a graven image in his chair, and occasionally she peered into any near mirror as if to seek inspiration from her own wicked eyes. For ten minutes amidst a petrifying silence she behaved thus; then, having solved part of her problem--the solution of the other part depended upon Strange's consent--she returned to face him.

"Do you mind imprisonment?" she asked casually.

The sailor jumped. "Goin' t' begin agin?" he demanded irritably.

"Answer my question. Do you mind imprisonment?"

"I do an' I don't, accordin' to th' dollars. Give it a name."

"Five thousand pounds."

"Twenty-five thousand, States currency," mused the captain. "Y wish me t' sample one of your gaols fur thet."

She nodded. "On charges of conspiracy and blackmail."

Strange jumped again. "My gun! D'y' intend t' advertise th' circus?"

"I intend to have my husband set free to enjoy his own. Since you have kidnapped him, you shall confess and suffer--for five thousand pounds."

"Leavin' you out, ma'am?"

"Oh, I had nothing to do with it, nor had my poor husband. You and Dr. Demetrius are the rascals."

"Huh! An' what'll y' pay the Doc.?"

"Nothing," she said serenely: "the Russian Government is paying him."

"Whew!" Strange whistled with a stare; "they've got him at las'."

"If you mean the Russian authorities, yes."

"Poor chap! He wasn't bad fur a foreiner. I kind o' froze on t' him somehow. But this catchy-catchy biznai ain't none o' mine, so let him slide." He shook his head vigorously. "Slide it is. An' this noo game o' yours, ma'am?"

Bending forward, until her mouth was almost at his right ear, she explained a very pretty scheme, which would oust Lionel and restore Jim's birthright, without inculcating her.

Strange listened calmly, and nodded heavy approval at intervals. All the time admiration deepened in his hard eyes, but this did not prevent him bargaining. "Yes," said he, balancing his hat carefully. "It kin be done. Six thousand, ain't it!"

"Five thousand."

"Six!" he insisted.

So much was at stake that Leah yielded. She could afford to do so, with fifty thousand a year in prospect. "Six, then--to be paid when you leave prison."

"Huh! An' when might that be?"

"How should I know?" said Lady Jim, crossly, for the strain on her nerves was great. "Ask some lawyer."

"Blackmail an' conspiracy," murmured Strange, reflectively. "Sounds like a few years of oakum-pickin', don't it? Not as I intend to give my opinion on these British gaols. Sing-sing's good enough fur me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Never you mind, ma'am. But if the dollars ain't planked down----"

"They will be. Can't you trust me, man?"

"I guess not. You're what I call a holy terror, an' no mistake. Firmingham, y' said-Firmingham." He nodded. "I've nailed it."

"When will you go down?"

"Arter I've seen thet land-shark 'bout the kind of poppy-cock th' bloomin' judge ull talk. Go slow, ma'am; y' git along with your share, an' I'll do mine. So long!"

Leah did not like to grasp the tarry hand extended, but out of diplomacy she was forced to touch the pitch which was defiling her. "I can depend upon you, Captain Strange."

He nodded. "Y' kin let it go at thet. So long, agin. An' if I'd married you," he added, with genuine emotion, "cuss me if I wouldn't hev bin runnin' the U.S.A. in th' Presidential Chair."

Leah digested this compliment at her leisure.

CHAPTER XXVIII

After that momentous interview Lady Jim realised the truth of Strange's scriptural quotation, although he had translated it into his own lax vernacular. Unfortunately, hearing it after the event, she could not take Isaiah's advice, and had too hastily condemned the fetish. She would have given much for the recovery of that precise peacock's feather, for, having freely thrown it away, it was doubtful to her superstitious mind if the luck would hold. Certainly she had arranged judiciously for Jim's return to civilisation, and the unscrupulous captain appeared willing to earn wages as a scapegoat; but there was always the unforeseen to be reckoned with. A chance word, a chance discovery, a too minute inquiry--these might wreck the whole scheme, and she would reap a

whirlwind, stormy enough to sweep her out of a social paradise into the bleak desert of Sinners-found-out. A most uncomfortable locality.

She did what she could, poor woman, to propitiate her Baal. A new peacock's feather was procured, and she apologised for her want of faith. Also she experimented with the new symbol. Would a particular costume arrive at a certain hour? Would some very doubtful stock which she held turn honest? Would Captain Strange, after consulting a lawyer, still hold to his nefarious bargain? The test proved satisfactory, for her Baal, apparently amenable to apology, worked excellently through the new semblance of his deity. The dress duly arrived within the fixed time; the shares rose rapidly, and enabled her to sell at a profit which she did not deserve; finally, a grubby note from Strange assured her without detail that he was on his way to Firmingham. It would seem that the prospect of picking oakum for a livelihood appealed to him, at the agreed price.

Pending the explosion of the mine to which Strange was about to apply a match, Leah possessed her soul in patience. Three days did she wait, and they were days of purgatory. For obvious reasons she did not return to Firmingham, but wrote to Lionel stating that she had received a terrible shock--nature not mentioned--and intended to consult the family solicitors about the same. She thus made herself safe about the sailor's visit, in case any one might wonder why he had come to her in the first instance. And in the letter she told the truth for once, since she paid a visit to Lincoln's Inn Fields. An explanation of her errand startled the suave head of a justly celebrated legal firm. On recovering from pardonable amazement he gave his client the full value of her six-and-eightpence.

"Kidnapping," explained Mr. Hall, to a tearful listener--for Lady Jim thought that the circumstances demanded emotion--"is not in itself a serious offence, and really applies only to persons under fourteen years of age. In the case of an adult like Lord James this sailor would be punished with--er--maybe two years' imprisonment. He might even be let off with a heavy fine."

Leah's face fell considerably. She would have to pay that fine, and did not relish parting with more money. "How interesting!" she murmured vaguely, and waited for further information.

"Blackmail, however," pursued the lawyer, emphatically, "is a very grave offence, and can be punished with five years' imprisonment, involving penal servitude."

"That would be better," agreed Lady Jim, thinking that Strange at hard labour would earn one thousand a year and have an extra thousand over when his term was ended. A profitable imprisonment for him, truly, she reflected, and extremely costly for her.

"Then again, Lady James, if the offence is committed by letter, sentence for life can be passed."

"Oh, he didn't write," she said hastily, and congratulated herself that Strange had not done so, since, even for so many thousands, he would not be inclined to remain a prisoner for ever; "but perhaps Mr. Kaimes may receive a letter. The man hinted that he would try in that quarter, seeing that I would not yield to his extortion."

"You should have had him arrested."

"I had not my wits about me. He would have shot me had I summoned the servants."

"Bless me, Lady James, had he a weapon?"

"A revolver," she replied, unscrupulously; "so you can see how I--a poor weak woman--was intimidated."

"That will add to his sentence," said Mr. Hall, upon which she wished she had checked her imagination. It would be foolish to push Strange into a corner, for as yet she could not reckon the exact power of his greed. However, she could not unsay what she had said, and nothing remained but to pray to the fetish and hope for the best.

"The Duke must be warned," went on Mr. Hall.

"Who?" asked Leah, just as sharply as she had asked Colley.

"The new Duke--I beg your pardon, for, of course, if this story is true, Lord James is the Duke of Pentland."

"You doubt the story, then?"

Hall raised his eyebrows and shook his head. "I cannot give an opinion until I have seen this man and sifted his statements." He paused and looked at her inquiringly. "I presume, Lady James, that this man closely resembles your husband?"

"What man? Oh, Garth--yes. You may guess how closely, when the late Duke, Lord Frith, and myself were all deceived. Certainly the likeness was well known in Firmingham. There were reasons," she added with hesitation--"family reasons."

"Oh--er--quite so." Mr. Hall, who knew something of the Adamite side of his late Grace, coughed away a laugh. "I can see how the mistake arose, Lady James. Natural enough--oh, dear me--natural enough."

"Why do you not give me my proper title?" she asked haughtily.

"Pardon me, but the truth of this man's wild story has yet to be proved. May I ask a few needful questions?"

A wave of her hand signified that he might, and she submitted to a tolerably stiff examination. Being prepared with artless answers to every question, she emerged triumphantly from the ordeal, and when in possession of *her* facts, Mr. Hall subscribed to the wickedness of Demetrius and Strange. "A pair of villains, my dear lady. The one sinned for love and the other from avarice; astonishing whither those passions lead us--astonishing. Well, well, we must hope. I trust, for your ladyship's sake, that the story is true."

"So do I," wept Leah, producing her handkerchief. "Not for the sake of the title or the money, dear Mr. Hall, but because my poor husband---- Oh----" here she skilfully broke down, for want of something to say.

"Pray calm yourself, Lady James. Let us hope that in a few days I shall be able to address you as the Duchess of Pentland."

"Give me back my husband--I ask no more," was her magnanimous reply.

And while driving to Curzon Street she reflected how very magnanimous it really was, seeing that she had no wish for Jim's company. To be tied to that log again was scarcely worth the income. Besides, Jim, who had no sense of decency, would assuredly laugh his loudest at the thought of her unnecessary

trouble. He would not even thank her for giving him his rights, although he must know that it was sorely against the grain for her to put up with his boring society. But in spite of Jim's probable ingratitude, she would behave as his wife--as the lenient woman she felt herself to be. Certainly her common sense recognised that he was returning from his sham grave with gifts in his hands, but of those she was the giver. And, seeing that she could betray his share in the conspiracy without inculpating herself, Leah foresaw the possession of limitless power to enforce obedience. That power she resolved to utilise for the purpose of getting her own unfettered way, and all the money she required for contemplated extravagances. Also, she intended to stop Jim's illicit flirtations. Now that he was a peer of the realm he would have "to purge and live cleanly," after the fashion of one Sir John Falstaff, Knight.

"We owe that much to society," thought Leah, virtuously, and considered the rumoured doings of black sheep who would be cast out of the Mayfair fold were their housetops removed. That the shifting of the Curzon Street mansion tiles might also be attended with danger she did not pause to consider.

On the ensuing afternoon Askew arrived to say farewell; but, as circumstances were too embarrassing to permit of her taking any interest in other people's affairs, she declined to see him. Nevertheless, he urged a personal interview, on the plea that he would be absent for months. She yielded very unwillingly, as her nerves clamoured for some outward sign of emotion, which by the rules of society she would be obliged to suppress.

"I know I shall be horribly rude," murmured Lady Jim, when the footman left the room to introduce the visitor; "but he has brought it on himself"--which excuse she considered ample for ensuing impoliteness.

Askew, with mistaken consideration, entered the drawing-room almost on tiptoe, and proceeded forthwith to condole with her in stage whispers. She soon put a stop to this artificial sympathy. Further reference to life beyond the grave she could not and would not stand, as she told him crisply.

"Don't talk funeral, unless you wish to see me wreck the room. I have had months of crying and crape and condoling."

"But the sad circumstances----"

"Are such that I did not wish to see you," she retorted, finishing his sentences for him as usual, after her old fashion. "I feel so scratchy that I declined your visit out of sheer pity. But you would insist, so don't blame me if I am disagreeable."

"You can never be disagreeable," said Askew, soothingly.

"Can't I? You wait ten minutes and see."

"I think I had better go, Lady Jim."

"For your own sake, I think you had. Good-bye."

Askew still kept his seat. "I only wish to say that I am very--very sorry for your terrible loss."

"Lady Frith's terrible loss, you mean. Go and see her, if you want to play the hired mourner."

"Ah, poor Lady Frith----"

"Now don't begin about her," snapped Leah, viciously.

"But you must be sorry----"

"I am--for myself. I have been dosed with the post-mortem virtues of those three Kaimes men until I feel that only wicked people are truly agreeable. I regret the Duke, who was a nice old sinner turned saint, and I lament Lord Frith for his goodness and sweetness of disposition--there."

"I never heard that Lord Frith had a sweet disposition."

"He hadn't; but I'm only saying the kind of things you expect me to say."

"Oh!" Askew looked shocked. "Have the--er--bodies been found?"

"I don't think so; but you can ask the executors who look after these things. Any more questions?"

"No; only I am sorry----"

"You said that before. You are sorry, I am sorry, we are sorry. I think that conjugation exhausts the subject. Let us talk of your yacht, Mr. Askew."

"She's all right," he murmured, confused. It was difficult to comprehend this woman, who so lightly dropped a family sorrow to take on a subject which he knew interested her but little.

"And when do you sail?"

"To-morrow or next day. I came to say good-bye."

"Oh!" said Leah, carelessly. "I fancied you came to sympathise. Well"--she rose and extended her hand--"good-bye."

Askew clasped her hand coldly, wondering how he ever came to love so heartless a woman. As Jim was returning in glory and had not seen Señorita Fajardo since his reported death, Leah felt that she could safely dismiss this boy, to go where he would. Besides, she was beginning to find him a bore. He took things much too seriously, and was by no means so good-looking as she had imagined. All the same, after the manner of woman, who wants to have her pie and eat it, she by no means approved of his readiness to depart.

"You don't seem to care much," she said reproachfully, and felt quite ill-used.

Askew coloured boyishly. "I am not broken-hearted, certainly."

"I do not believe that you have a heart."

"You are right--it is at Rosario."

"Then I advise you to go after it, lest it should get mixed up with other men's hearts."

"Lola is no flirt," cried Askew, loyally.

"Then she must be altogether too good for this world. Good-bye! Bring Mrs. Askew to see me when you return."

"I fear you would be bored with her," said he, sore and sarcastic.

"Probably. Married women are not interesting, except to people like you and Jim, who persistently break the tenth commandment."

"I know one married woman who----"

"Who has just said good-bye to you, and repeats it," snapped Lady Jim, seeing he was about to be rude.

"Oh, very well, then, good-bye," said Askew, going out in a rage with her and with himself. And so they parted.

Leah returned smiling to her seat, delighted that she made him lose his temper, as by doing so she had recovered her own. It was so satisfactory to a deserted woman to think that a man whose love had cooled should go away uncomfortable. "And what a mercy he is gone," said Lady Jim, settling to read fashions. "I hope he'll stop in America with that Lola creature for the rest of his silly life. I suppose he won't turn over this page of his book of life, but tear it out." And in this she was perfectly right. He did.

Towards five o'clock Lionel arrived. Although she had no intimation of his coming, she quite expected to see him, and was prepared to make any necessary scene. The young clergyman looked white and excited, entering the room so rapidly that the footman had hardly time to announce the title that he was losing.

Lady Jim, recognising a crisis, came forward rapidly with studied emotion. "You know all--all," she said in a choking voice, and caught his hands.

He was taken aback. "Yes, if you mean that your husband lives."

"It is true, then--it is true;" she tottered to the sofa, and cast herself down with passionate emotion. "Say that it is true!"

"I think so. But how do you know?"

Leah sat up with a puzzled look. "Did you not get my letter saying that I had had a shock, and intended to consult Mr. Hall?"

"Yes; but you did not explain."

"I could not, seeing the position it places you in."

"Never mind me. If Jim is alive, he takes the title. So this man came to you."

"He did, and tried to extort money. Because I refused he hinted that he would buy your silence. I never thought that he would dare to go to Firmingham; but when you entered, a look told me all. But can you believe this story--it seems incredible?"

"The police do not think so," said Lionel, grimly.

Lady Jim dropped on to the sofa again. "The police!"

"Of course. This scoundrel came to Firmingham, and said that if I gave him three thousand pounds he would keep Jim away from England so that I could enjoy the title. I learned the truth about this conspiracy of Dr. Demetrius, and then had Captain Strange arrested. To-day a policeman brought him to London. He is in prison."

"Serve him right, the brute. Did he not tell you how he threatened me?"

"No; I never guessed that he had come to you."

"But he did, and said that if I gave him two thousand pounds he would bring Jim back. Failing me, he tried you at a higher price. I should have had him arrested, Mr. Hall says, but I could not. I was bewildered--quite bewildered. It seems incredible. Oh, Lionel,"--she laid her hand imploringly on his sleeve--"surely Demetrius did not behave so vilely!"

"I fear that he did. The man, as every one in London knows, was madly in love with you."

"I never encouraged him--really I didn't."

"No," said Lionel, bluntly. "I do not think he was rich enough for you to encourage."

"How can you think so badly of me?"

"Because you are all self--you admitted that long ago. To do you justice, I think you were a good wife to Jim."

"I *am* a good wife. Don't make me out to be the widow I am not. Of course, this story must be false," she ended, helplessly.

"I think not--it is too circumstantial. And moreover, this man, who appears to be illiterate, could not invent such a tale. Plainly the Russian, who seemed to be clever, conspired to get rid of Jim, so that you might be induced to marry him."

"As though I would ever do such a thing! I told you at Firmingham that I had no intention of marrying. I daresay Jim and I will come together again, and be very happy."

"I hope so--I trust so," said Lionel, with solemn emphasis. "Remember, God is giving you another chance."

"I made very good use of the last one," she retorted sullenly. "Jim was always to blame, and not I. I suppose this insurance money will have to be given back."

"Certainly. You can hardly complain of that, seeing the income you will now receive."

"Jim will, you mean. I expect he'll turn out a screw now that he is rich. Your spendthrifts are always old misers. And I don't see why you should be nasty. I'm sure I have had a miserable time."

"You will have a happy one now," he said, relenting.

"With Jim?" she cried derisively. "How optimistic you are!"

"Surely I have a right to be, when God is so good to you."

"God," she echoed, vaguely, and thinking of the obliging fetish. "Oh yes, of course. I'm awfully thankful. The insurance money would not have lasted for ever, and I might not have found so manageable a husband as Jim. Things will be jolly now."

Lionel groaned. "Is that as high as you can rise?" he asked, rebukingly.

"Oh, Lord, what do you want me to say?" cried Leah, with the causeless anger of the overwrought. "I can't think of pious proverbs when I am like this. What with supposed deaths and real deaths, and nothing but funerals to amuse one, I don't

know if I am on my head or my heels. There, that's vulgar, and you needn't look disgusted if it is. I feel vulgar. I could run out and howl up and down Curzon Street like a Whitechapel woman in a tantrum. And if you preach,--if you--you-- -- Oh, what fools men are!"

She choked, rolled in her chair, ripped a handkerchief, and kicked away a footstool.

The curate--as he was once more--saw how she tried to fight down the hysteria, and wisely refrained from speech. A single word might cause the primitive emotions to burst with volcanic force through the imposed customs of civilisation. Considering the joyful news of Jim Kaimes' resurrection and the trouble of the attempted blackmail, it was natural that she should suddenly betray feminine weakness. She was but a woman when all was said and done. Leah would have repudiated this conclusion with scorn, as she had small regard for her sex; but a woman she was at the moment, unstrung, foolish, wild with dread that the unforeseen might happen. Lionel moved silently to the door. In a moment she was at his side, reaching him with the bound of a pantheress.

"Don't be angry," she panted, laying her hand on his arm; "but you do worry me so, and if you knew--if you really knew----" She gasped and bit her lip, to prevent an unguarded tongue blurting out the whole.

"There, there!" He patted her hand, and she could have slapped him for the caress, which revealed his knowledge of her weakness. "It's all right--all right. Be calm! There, there!"

"Oh, Lord, what tact!" and so disgusted was she with the stupidity of the man that her nerves relaxed "I say, Lionel," with an artificial laugh, "aren't you sorry for yourself?"

"Not in the least," he replied promptly. "I am no Jacob to usurp the heritage of Esau. High or low, we can all serve God in our degrees. Ask Jim to make me vicar of Firmingham."

"I will, if you promise not to preach."

"How would you have me earn my salary, then?" he asked humorously, and glad that she appeared more composed. "Now I advise you to lie down."

"Yes," she assented submissively; "I will lie down. And you?"

"I go at once to see Mr. Hall, about getting Jim set free. Good-bye, Duchess," and in a moment he was gone, anxious to escape further irresponsible speech.

"Duchess!" echoed Leah, staring at the closed door. "Duchess!"

It was all right then, so far as Lionel was concerned, seeing that he gave her the title which Mr. Hall withheld. He at least believed in the wonderful story of Strange. With Lionel on her side things would be bound to come out all right. Still, although the trees were thinning, she was not yet out of the wood. The green light of safety had not yet been substituted for the red danger signal.

"I am aching all over," said Leah, addressing her reflection in the mirror; "there's a twist of nerves between my eyes, and I could scream the house down. But I shan't!" She flung away from the glass, gripping her courage with both hands. "I'll be calm, and easy in my mind, till Jim comes back. When the worst is over, I shall collapse--I know I shall. Till then--till then--Oh, God"--the weakness she declined to recognise broke forth in prayer--"give me grit and pluck to fight through to the end."

So she prayed, but not to the fetish. In this uplifted moment Leah felt that Lionel's Deity was not a myth, but a terrible reality.

CHAPTER XXIX

Then did "Rumour, painted full of tongues," enter into Lady Jim's strictly private life and depart with half-truths for the bewildering of gossips. In some marvellous way the news leaked out, as news will, despite careful caulking of the human vessels containing it. Lord James Kaimes, ran the babble, had been

kidnapped by his medical attendant, who, substituting an illegal corpse for that of the husband he wished to supplant, had plotted to secure the wife. This was the tune, correct enough; then came its variations. The hurdy-gurdy of society ground out wonderful twiddles and twists of false notes, distorting the original theme into a melody Leah herself would not have recognised. Not that she heard any of the *fiortura*. Prudence counselled a retreat to Firmingham pending the home-coming of Jim, and thither, very wisely, she went. At this crisis of her fortunes Lady Jim felt that she required the countenance of all truly respectable people, however dull, and therefore sheltered like a maltreated chick under Hilda Frith's wing. To console the widowed and orphaned was her obvious excuse,--so obvious, indeed, that she declined to make it. Thus did she escape questions about the one engrossing topic of drawing-room, club, and public-house bar.

Every one, from the lowest to the highest, talked exhaustively, and the newspapers, cheap and costly, printed scandal with alluring recklessness. Out of London E.C. issued halfpenny journals with lurid headings over incomplete histories of the plot, invented on unsound premises. These transparent fictions began with the Russian's snake-in-the-grass intrusion into the happy home of an attached couple, and ended with a political cry for the exclusion of such immoral aliens from the Island of the Blest, which is England. The more expensive small-beer chronicles refused to believe that so fantastic an occurrence could have happened in these enlightened days of police-courts and publicity; but, nevertheless, supplied middle-class breakfast-tables with equally doubtful data, out of which to weave romances of the minor peerage. "The triangle of Dumas the younger," cried one scribe, with a fine disregard for meaning and metaphor, "must never be sounded in our dear Motherland!" A sufficient sample this of the stuff supplied. But, since the silly season prevailed when reporters, one and all, were credited with March-hare madness, such incongruities were pardoned, and the public gaped to swallow full-sized camels.

The clubs buzzed like hives at swarming time, for their members wondered at Jim's adventure; wondered, also, how "so knowing a Johnny"--so they put it--"could allow himself to be diddled by a measly little foreign beast." All were agog for the hero's appearance, and curious friends thirsted for a first-hand account of the enforced Odyssey. Many speculated as to the probability of Jim being sobered by untoward experience into becoming a truly respectable Duke, and a few made original observations anent a much-quoted leopard and his unchangeable spots. In this way was the statement that men are not born gossips contradicted, for the Eveless Edens of St. James's Street, Pall Mall, and

Piccadilly resembled a village sewing-class in mid-career.

The drawing-rooms, as was natural, interested themselves chiefly in Leah, and chafed that she should become an unexpected Duchess. Hitherto Lady Jim's skilful man[oe]uvring had saved her reputation, but, as animals fall upon the wounded of their kind, so did the pack of hounds she had never hunted with fling itself forward, full-voiced and open-mouthed. Rejoicing women cried her sins on the housetop with surprising details. She must have encouraged Dr. Demetrius shamefully, else he never would have gone to such lengths, though why he should do so for such a woman it was impossible to understand. They had never admired her, said the pure-minded, and had always suspected her of being no better than she should be. Poor Mr. Askew, too: had she not put an end to a family matrimonial arrangement by her arts; had she not inveigled him to Paris in the hope that he would marry her in haste to repent at leisure? Certainly, aware of her character before it was too late, he had sailed to the South Pole or the North Pole, or to somewhere she could not follow, as she was certainly dying to do. Her vanity was insatiable. She had flirted quite indecently with Sir Billy Richardson, though he was but an infant lately breeched. Julia Hengist had only snatched her lord from the claws of this harpy by the merest, the very merest, chance. And the money she wasted! Oh! Why, the bailiffs had twice and thrice been in the Curzon Street house. Also, she was so lucky at bridge that she assuredly must cheat, and it showed what a blackleg she was, that no one had ever caught her cheating. Then her dresses were ridiculous for a woman with her poor husband's income. She had ruined him completely--that was why he ran away, in a dying condition. And the money had not gone to discharge lawful debts; she never paid anything, therefore she must have spent the cash on some secret vice, which she certainly must have, since she always posed as being so very correct. She ought to be cut; she ought to be in gaol; whipping was too good for her; put her in a pillory and throw stones at her. And let such a creature be anathema maranatha for ever and ever and ever, Amen.

But for all this throwing of stones by ladies who were without sin, Leah had her supporters in some, who must have been wicked, since they declined to condemn her wholesale on hearsay evidence. These pointed out that she had behaved admirably, when Jim's supposed death had been reported. The late Marquis of Frith was himself deceived by the likeness of the corpse to his brother, though of course there were family reasons for such a likeness. Also, the old Duke had paid the Curzon Street debts, which so good a man would not have done had they been of a questionable character. And the very respectable Hengists, kind

things, spoke highly of Lady Jim's patience under trying domestic difficulties caused by an unfaithful husband. Besides, Leah--poor, dear, persecuted woman--was now the Duchess of Pentland, and could do no wrong. She was a misunderstood angel. Hilda Frith doted on her, and every one knew how very, very particular Hilda Frith was. To decry a woman who had suffered so much, and who had so nobly borne suffering, was a crime--worse, was a blunder, seeing that the latest Duchess would assuredly sway society, to bless or damn at her good pleasure. The peerage--the immaculate peerage of Great Britain and Ireland--would stand or fall by Leah Pentland, as a perfect example of what a titled woman should be.

In this way raged the war of tongues, while Lionel, in Mr. Hall's company, and with the assistance of Scotland Yard officials, sought for the missing prodigal. Strange, playing the game with characteristic stubbornness, refused to indicate the whereabouts of his victim's floating prison, and, as the *Stormy Petrel* under a new coat of paint, with readjusted rigging and bearing a prettier but unknown name, could not be found in any shipping list, there appeared little prospect of finding the kidnapped. The telegraph wires sizzled in the air and under the sea, with messages to home and foreign ports; bills with Jim's portrait and a most flattering description were scattered broadcast; a reward large enough to tempt Mammon himself was offered in every journal, and in many languages; and the journals themselves denounced the police authorities--who were merely mortal, poor scapegoats--for not producing a mislaid nobleman in five minutes. It was an enjoyable time for armchair critics, who, on insufficient evidence, knew exactly what should be done, and blamed the police, confronted with hard facts, for not doing it.

As to the culprit, he might have been Nero, Judas Iscariot, and Captain Dreyfus rolled into one, from the obliquity which was heaped upon him. Since he refused to produce his prisoner, inquisitive people were frantic with annoyance. One enthusiast even suggested that torture should be used to make him speak; another considered that so recalcitrant a brute should be starved into submission; a third that he should be offered a free pardon on condition that he sent back a regretted Duke to his lonely wife. But Strange, chuckling over the storm he had raised, hugged his secret close. Hall, the ducal lawyer, knew what his terms were, and if Hall did not choose to accede he would have to remain without an aristocratic client.

Hall, however, had no notion of losing the money with which the accession of Lord James Kaimes to a wealthy title would probably fill his pockets. Still, Strange's terms were too preposterous to consider for one moment. He had to consider them for a fortnight, all the same, and finding that they did not vary, he came down to consult Lady Jim, after a lengthy interview with the Rev. Lionel Kaimes at Lambeth.

Even though Jim had risen from the dead, Leah had not laid aside her mourning. Indeed, she added fresh crape to show her grief for the recent deaths, and greeted the lawyer with the air of one to whom life is a burden. And so it was to her, at the moment. The funereal atmosphere of the great house, the delicacy of her position until Jim returned to tell her that all was safe, and the constant boredom of listening to Hilda's wordy lamentations--these things wore her out, and Mr. Hall noted that she looked fatigued.

"Natural, very natural," thought Mr. Hall, unfortunately aloud.

"What is natural?" asked Leah, seeing his eyes on her.

The man's parchment cheeks reddened. "I beg your pardon, Duchess. I did not intend to speak aloud; a trick of mine, when I am interested. Bad habit--bad habit. I was thinking that you looked weary--natural, very natural."

"Weary!" Leah placed her elbows on the table which stood between them. "I tell you what, Mr. Hall: unless you bring my husband back soon, I shall take to drink."

"My--dear--Duchess."

"Well, and don't men take to drink when they are worried? What better can a poor woman do than imitate the lords of creation? You are so inconsistent. What about my particular lord? Has that beast spoken out?"

"No. He refuses to speak save on his own terms, which are, I may say, preposterous--extremely so."

Leah thought of the price to be paid for the imprisonment Strange was now undergoing, and smiled dryly. "He is the kind of man who would ask for the sun--and get it," she added, as an afterthought.

"Whether he gets it is for you to determine, Duchess."

"Oh!" She looked at him sharply. "Am I to arbitrate?"

"Quite so--quite so. A very well-chosen word--arbitrate." He chuckled heartily, and adjusted his pince-nez.

"And the joke, Mr. Hall?"

"It might almost be one, Duchess, so preposterous is the demand of this man. He refuses to reveal the whereabouts of his Grace, unless--prepare yourself for a surprise--unless he is set free. Now then, Duchess"--Mr. Hall threw himself back in his chair, and flung open his frock-coat--"is that not pre--pos--ter--ous?"

"I can't see it myself," replied Leah, coolly. "He seems to be a very sensible man."

"But--but--he ought to be punished."

"I fear he would not agree with you there. Is this what you have come to see me about?"

"Yes. All attempts to find the Duke have been made in vain: the resources of civilisation are exhausted. Only one thing remains--to accede to the prisoner's terms. I saw the Reverend Lionel Kaimes, and he agrees not to prosecute. Now I come to you----"

"To ask me not to prosecute?"

"Exactly--exactly. The man attempted to blackmail you and the Reverend Mr. Kaimes. If neither one of you will prosecute, the magistrate will be obliged to dismiss the case for want of evidence. And then----"

"Then Captain Strange--that is his name, isn't it?--will send Jim back."

"I question it--I question it. Once free, he may again attempt to blackmail--that is, he may refuse to surrender his prisoner without money being paid."

"I do not agree with you," said Leah, mendaciously. "The man has had a fright, and will not trust himself again into the lion's mouth. Besides, even if he did try to blackmail, we could refuse, and he can't keep my husband for ever on board his dirty little boat. A prisoner who cannot be ransomed would be expensive to keep. Jim has an enormous appetite."

Hall smiled at the aristocratic jest. "True--true; you put the case concisely--very concisely, I may say. The question is, whether it is right to set the man free, and trust to an honour which I fear he does not possess."

Leah thought for a few minutes, playing her part to perfection. "It appears that Captain Strange, very wisely, will not open his mouth so long as he is shut up. If set free he promises to be amenable to reason. Of two evils I choose the least, as Mr. Kaimes has done."

"That means you will not prosecute?"

"Yes. Let the man go, and probably my husband will arrive within the week. How can it be done?"

"Very easily. To-morrow, or the next day, Strange can be brought before the magistrate; but as neither you nor Mr. Kaimes will appear, the charge will be dismissed."

"And then?"

"Then, my dear Duchess, he will vanish into the world, and we shall have to trust to the honour of an admitted blackmailer. It is really a terrible dilemma," cried the lawyer, dismally, "and forms such an evil precedent--oh, a most deadly blow at justice, I assure you."

"Not at all," contradicted Leah, coolly; "we can say that Captain Strange turned King's evidence."

"But, my dear Duchess"

"What's the use of talking?" she snapped impolitely. "I have told you what to do. Go and do it."

"Really----"

"Pardon me if I am rude, but I am not fit to talk;" and she hurried out of the room, glad that she had settled the matter thus. Hall departed to London, reflecting that the rudeness of the Duchess was quite explicable under the circumstances, but resenting it all the same. To punish her he had a great mind to delay the return of the Duke, until his good sense, or his avarice, told him that this would be a costly price to pay for a petty revenge.

In this way Captain Strange triumphed, as most people can, by simply holding his tongue. As no evidence was forthcoming, when he presented himself before the magistrate, he could not be committed for trial, and after a few formalities walked out of the dingy court a free man. Hall followed him as quickly as was consistent with the dignity of a Lincoln's Inn Fields solicitor, but stepped into the open air to find his bird had flown. Nor did inquiries at the third-rate Strand hotel result in an interview. The buccaneer, warned of possible danger, never reappeared to claim the carpet-bag which held a few shirts and oddments. He disappeared, apparently into the air, as did Macbeth's fortune-tellers. Hall was vexed, as he had intended Strange should be shadowed by detectives. Of this the astute sailor might have been aware, as he gave no chance to the bloodhounds of the law. "And we have to depend upon his honour about restoring the Duke," thought Hall, with anguish. It might have eased his mind had he known that the dependence was really to be placed on six thousand pounds being paid within a stated period. But of that he was ignorant, and Leah did not think it necessary to comfort her legal adviser in any way.

Indeed, she needed comfort herself sorely, for when a week passed and Jim did not reappear, she began to think that Strange was contriving some new villainy. Perhaps he was about to put up his price, and Leah was determined not to ransom Jim at any greater sum than that she had already agreed to. The newspapers were filled with astonished paragraphs about the inexplicable conduct of the authorities in connection with Strange's acquittal, and some kind friend sent the most spiteful of these to the waiting wife. Leah did not read the opinions of cranks set forth in inferior English and was much more taken up with a letter from Katinka Aksakoff. It was not easy to answer such a letter, yet she would be compelled to reply.

Mademoiselle Aksakoff wrote indignantly, saying that she did not believe the statements of the papers concerning the conspiracy of Constantine Demetrius. She denied that such a noble man would act in so base a way, and reminded Leah of their conversation on the terrace at Monte Carlo. "You then said that you did

not love him," complained the letter, "and insisted that he did not love you. But if he kidnapped your husband, so that you might be free to marry him, he must love you and you have lied. But I cannot believe that you would break my heart in this way, nor can I credit so honourable a man with such conduct." Katinka then went on to say that Demetrius had not been seen since he crossed to Paris. Where was he? Did Lady Jim know? If so, let her tell the writer, or else--then the epistle ended with a vague threat about hunting out Demetrius and learning the truth. "And when I do," ran the final line, "your conscience will tell you if we are to be friends or foes." This challenge--as it truly was--came from Paris, where Katinka was stopping at the Russian Embassy. It had been registered, to ensure delivery.

A most unpleasant letter. Leah felt inclined to tear it up, but some instinct told her that Katinka Aksakoff was a persistent girl, with much obstinacy in her character. If no reply came she would probably hasten to Firmingham for an interview, and Lady Jim did not care about having the second honeymoon of herself and her restored husband spoilt by the scene which would surely take place. After destroying several sheets of note-paper she produced a concise reply, saying as little as ever she could. Nevertheless, she was forced to say much she would have preferred left unsaid. Captain Strange, said Lady Jim's reply, declared that Demetrius had so conspired. But he had been set free and had disappeared. What he said might be true, or might not. Nothing could be known for certain unless Lord James returned, and up to the date of the letter he had not put in an appearance. Demetrius certainly had come to Paris--not to see the writer, but to interview M. Aksakoff about a possible pardon. At the Henri Trois Hotel the doctor had been seized with a fit, and a Dr. Helfmann had taken charge of him. "Since then," wrote Lady Jim, "I have not seen him. However, I enclose a letter which he sent me on the day I left Paris. It would seem that he has gone to Russia."

"And I hope Katinka will follow him there," said Leah, after adding a few Judas words of endearment. "Aksakoff might keep her on his Volga estate. She'll only make mischief if she comes to England. I'll warn her father of that;" and she did, for M. Aksakoff received a letter, which hinted that his daughter might prove to be a possible fire-brand. And so the matter, for the time being, ended.

But Jim had not yet arrived. Seven days passed, and the eighth night since the buccaneer's release closed in. Leah felt the strain terribly, and hardly ate or slept. Hilda did what she could to cheer her up, but, not knowing the whole truth,

could do very little. Lady Jim declined to take drugs, as her last experience of these had shown her how they aged people, though that might have been her fancy. All she could do, and did do, was to keep a tight rein on her emotions, and beyond looking pale, and a trifle haggard, no one could have told that she was in any way disturbed. Joan was a great comfort to her in those days of strain, and so was Lionel, with his prophecies that all would yet be well. But Leah had no one to whom she could tell the whole shocking truth, and it was desperately trying to a woman, whose nervous system was almost wrecked, to hold her tongue. These still waters were running very deep.

She found a certain relief in motion, and while Hilda wept and wailed that the bodies of her dear husband and his father had never been cast ashore for Christian burial, Leah's motor-car tore round the country through storm and sunshine. She would not even take a chauffeur, but engineered the machine herself. Providence, or the fetish that stood to her in place of it, watched over her escapades. She met with no accident, not even the most trivial, although in her reckless driving she did her best to reduce the car to match-wood. Like a witch on a broomstick she flew round the country, frantic and insistent, as though she sought the enjoyment of some wizard Sabbath. The motor flung mile after mile behind, with a buzz and a hum, and the speed of a destroyer buffeting a rough sea. Leah, with her hand on the levers, swooped down narrow lanes, spun furiously along the King's highway, crashed through scared villages, and raced the setting sun to the verge of the astonished lands. It was the extreme danger of these flights which delighted and strengthened her; and if she had a large bill to pay for breaking every known law in the county policemen's note-books, it was easy for the Duchess of Pentland to pay for such frolics. The thrill, the dash, the knowledge of power, the governance of a flying bomb-shell--these things were worth double, treble, quadruple the money. She was inebriated with danger, exalted by the constant nearness of death, and, like a she-Satan, defiantly self-sufficient, scorned both God and man. Of woman, needless to say, she took no account whatsoever.

Then came one memorable night, riotously wild with wind and rain. With gleaming lamps, at top speed, facing the wrath of conflicting elements battling under a stormy sky, she drove her machine roaring up the avenue. A quick turn of the hand and she stayed it, fuming and whirring like a live thing, before the porch. Contrary to custom, the door was open. Against the light she saw Lionel, and in a moment guessed the inevitable. Leaving the chauffeur to attend to the monster, this Mrs. Frankenstein sprang up the steps and dragged Lionel under

the glare of the electric lamp. A look into his face redoubled the beat of her heart. There, sure enough, she saw what she expected to see.

"Take me to him," she breathed, still retaining her grip on his arm.

"But are you quite prepared? He is in the library, and----"

Leah flung the curate away so forcibly that he staggered against the wall. She was out of the hall, she was at the library door, she was in the library itself, and all in two quick-drawn breaths.

"Hulloa, Leah," said a well-known voice, in a well-known manner.

She did not answer, but stared with a bloodless face, possessed entirely by the devil of hysteria. Then she dropped, without a cry or a word. Like a blood-mare, she had held out to the winning-post, and thus paid the price of victory.

CHAPTER XXX

There are periods in the growth of a tree when the sap, unable to circulate freely, coagulates into knots and protuberances. Leah had heard some empirical dabbler in science say as much, and recognised it as a truthful symbol of her existence for the twelve months following Jim's return. There was certainly a knot in her life, for somehow, in an unaccountable way, things seemed to be at a standstill. Before intermeddling with criminal matters she had indulged her senses in every possible way, and now that she had receded within the legal limits of action, she was prepared to indulge them again. To her surprise, they did not respond, and she discovered that the nursery stage of enjoyment had been passed. That intermezzo of fierce endeavour, of scheming and fighting, of dancing on the edge of a precipice, and of wandering in perilous ways, had ruined her for

untroubled days and comfortable nights. While battling with desperate fortunes she had detested the storm and necessary stress of the encounter; now she longed to set her forces in array once more and dare the worst. The salt had lost its savour, and her vitiated palate demanded pepper--red pepper, hot and biting--to flavour the good things ready for her eating at life's banquet.

But Leah found, as many had done before her, that desire is better than success, that there is more zest in striving than in attaining. She had longed for ample funds, and since she possessed full control of the Pentland income this longing was almost, but not quite, satisfied. Nevertheless, her soul was hungry still. She bought everything she fancied, and scarcely cast a look on her most costly and attractive purchases. She travelled with the luxurious surroundings of a queen, and only felt bored; she stopped at home, and yawned incessantly twice round the clock. She would have willingly remunerated the inventor of a new pleasure, but like Xerxes, she could not find so imaginative a man. It was truly lamentable to think that she should possess the moon she had cried for, only to find it was but a used-up world.

Jim, on the contrary, flourished healthily under his strawberry leaves, and this best-of-all-possible-world satisfaction added to his wife's exasperation. Daily he grew stouter and more plethoric, daily he made the same stupid observations, and daily he indulged in the gross material pleasures dear to his infinitesimal soul, which was being smothered in superabundant flesh.

"You are like a pig removed into a new sty," his wife scornfully informed him.

"Not a bad sty," answered the Duke, looking round the room.

"Good enough for middle-class people, but not for us, Jim. We are desperately poor as Duke and Duchess."

"That's so, Leah; but you spend most of the income."

"I have a right to. Don't forget what I have done for you."

"You give me no chance," said her husband, bitterly. "Every time we have a row you mention things that needn't be mentioned. And after all, Leah, you got me back for your own convenience."

"I am not so sure of that. I wish now that I had kept the thirty thousand which we had to pay back, and had let you remain where you were."

"On board Strange's odd-job steamer? It wasn't so bad, though I was chained by the leg. I learnt a lot about engines there; used to watch 'em when she was bumping through hurricanes. They were triple expansion, too. It was fun to watch the old Scotch engineer with his hand on the throttle-valve, and hear him curse when the screw leaped sky-high to race like a motor. I've had worse times--much worse."

He spoke with more animation than usual, and Leah sympathised with his enthusiasm. She also would have enjoyed herself on a rotten hulk with doubtful engines and an hourly chance of going down into the great green seas; the excitement would have been intense, and the death a clean one. Perhaps Jim had forgotten the softer emotions of man when the tramp stormed north with every rivet in her hull straining for dispersion. She wondered. "I suppose you missed Señorita Fajardo then?"

"No; curiously enough, I didn't. There was too much fun in thinkin' what would come next to bother about her. I'm a bit of a philosopher, Leah, an' when I can't get cake I chew bread. Now I've got the cake I'm enjoyin' it."

"And eating too much of it. Look how stout yon are getting."

"Respectable men always get stout when they grow old."

"You are not old."

"I'm a bit elderly. Somehow I don't enjoy larks so much as I used to," mused Jim, thoughtfully--"sign of age, I suppose. But I daresay I'll get some sort of fun out of life, an' maybe will need old Jarvey Peel's money at sixty. It'll be more than thirty thousand by then."

"Less the six thousand you paid Strange," said his Duchess, cruelly.

Jim winced. "Bit of a pull, that--hey! Nice fancy price I've had to pay for your fun, Leah."

"It was to bring you back."

"To make you a Duchess, you mean."

"One would think you were middle class to hear you talk of titles in that respectful way. Who bothers about such things nowadays? I have been bored to death since Strange's blackmail turned you into a pauper Duke."

Her husband made a grimace at this very plain speaking. "I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Leah. Hang it, I thought you really loved me when you fainted on my return."

"All acting, my good man," she assured him, annoyed by his recalling that twelve-month-old weakness. "I had to impress the family somehow."

"Then you don't love me?" said Jim, slowly.

"What a question to ask after nearly seven years of married life."

"But I'm respectable now," urged Jim, setting forth the contents of the new page he had turned over. "I don't race or bet overmuch, an' never look at a pretty woman. I go to church, an' sit in the Lords, an' take the chair at charity dinners, an'----"

"You do that last because you love eating. All the charity funds are spent on the victuals, and the poor get about a penny in the collected pounds. Oh, you are quite a model, Jim, and so dull."

This is but a sample of the few conversations the ducal pair allowed themselves, for they did not foregather with any enthusiasm. For propriety's sake the Duke and Duchess of Pentland were seen together at the few functions they could attend during the months of mourning; their home life was outwardly harmonious, and the crying down of a grass-widow which had been heard during those weeks of suspense following Strange's arrest had changed to crying up, when it was seen how very correctly the new Duchess behaved. Therefore they saw one another only officially, save on rare occasions. Leah found Jim dull, as she had frankly told him, and he winced always at his wife's tongue, which had lost none of its cutting power. Even his stupid brain grasped the fact that she was changed, though in what way he could not exactly say. She was certainly restless, and his bovine contentment with things-as-they-are could not understand this phase. Also she was dissatisfied, although she had secured all she had wanted by almost a miracle.

"Rum creatures, women," soliloquised the philosopher, sauntering to his club. "If you gave 'em the solar system to play with they'd howl for the universe," which was a high flight for Jim to take in the way of metaphor.

Leah sometimes thought that the long period of mourning might have darkened her outlook on life. She and Jim were forced by a ridiculously particular world to live quietly, and she could not indulge herself to the full. A constant succession of black dresses palled on one fond of colours, and custom forbade her filling the various ducal residences with amusing people, who in any case were almost impossible to find. Then, as Leah stated, they were really poor, considering the title. What with regiments of servants and the stately mansions which housed them, the horses and carriages, and motors, and rents and taxes, and unnecessary personal expenditure, and equally unnecessary charities, it was truly difficult to make two aristocratic ends meet. The Duchess of Pentland had to contrive and arrange almost as much as had Lady Jim. From two thousand a year to twenty-five times that amount seems a large jump, but the title nullified the value of the estates. Leah ardently prayed that the fetish would increase the incoming and decrease the outgoing, but her Baal seemed to think that it had done enough, even for so devout a woman. "Am I never going to have a good time?" wailed Leah. Later she found that the wail was unnecessary, for the fetish pitied his worshipper and granted her prayer. Coal of the best quality was found on a Welsh property of the Kaimes family, and Hall prophesied that in a year or two the ducal income would be doubled. Leah took heart at this sign of grace, as one really could manage pretty well on one hundred thousand a year. But a pound a minute was Leah's idea of a moderate income, and then she would have grumbled that each hour only brought her in sixty sovereigns. However, she decided to spend what she had and what was coming along from the coal to the last farthing, and arranged when the year of sorrow was ended--as it now was--to take her place in the very gayest of society. She would be presented again this season according to custom, and then would see about exhausting the most advanced pleasures of a civilisation that could not do enough for one of her greedy appetite. This she told to Lady Canvey.

"That is a mistake," rejoined the sagacious octogenarian, who was a year older in body and a year younger in brain. "If you exhaust everything in this world, nothing will be left for you but to try the next. And I don't think you are quite prepared for that, my dear."

"Perhaps not. I never set up for being a saint."

"No. That is a pleasure you have not yet exhausted. Why not try it?"

"Because I am no hypocrite. What is the use of pretending to be goody-goody, when you are not?"

"Saints are holy, not goody-goody."

"It's the same thing."

"It might be with you, certainly. But you are not the sort to be canonised."

"Well, I don't know. A sinner is the raw material out of which a saint is manufactured. You can't be really good, unless you have been really very bad."

"That is useful information," said Lady Canvey, dryly; "and very encouraging to people like yourself. You might make an attempt at being Saint Leah or Saint Jezebel."

"Lady Canvey!"

"Oh," the old dame chuckled, "then you do know something of Scripture."

"Yes, but I don't quote it to annoy other people."

"Your tongue is quite clever enough to do without such aid, my dear. And don't lose your temper--I am only talking for your good."

"Disagreeable conversations are always prefaced by that remark. Yes?"

"I was thinking you might begin on your saintly career by endowing a church with this coal money. They build churches very cheap nowadays. You can have one of red brick, and----"

"There are too many churches, and too few worshippers," interrupted the Duchess, with a shrug; "besides, I propose to endow myself with the coal money. I daresay I shall give fifty pounds or so to Lionel for his paupers."

"You must not ruin yourself, my dear," said Lady Canvey, with affectionate spite. "I thought that Lionel, as a married man, and the Vicar of Firmingham, had nothing to do with paupers. There are none in the parish there--at least, there

were none in Pentland's time," she ended with emphasis.

"I suppose you mean to hint that Jim is stopping his charities and putting on the screw. Don't distress yourself, godmother; everything is as it was, save that our tenants and villagers are more gorged and much more impudent. Lionel doesn't appreciate the godliness of his heritage, because his parishioners pay their rents regularly and come to church without the whip. They are so pious that his occupation is gone."

"That would not suit an energetic Christian like Lionel."

"It doesn't. He and Joan take pleasure trips into the Lambeth slums and ask seedy ruffians to stay with them in the country. What with converted burglars and wives who assure you they haven't been beaten for weeks, the place is quite a Whitechapel Paradise. Lionel preaches to the ruffians, and Joan listens to the wives with whole skins. I believe they join forces to wash the children. Oh, they have rollicking times at Firmingham Vicarage, I assure you."

"Very meritorious times," said Lady Canvey, reprovingly--"quite like the primitive Christian Church."

"Less clean, I fancy, and more ungrammatical," murmured Leah.

"Don't mock, my dear. Lionel is a noble man."

"I quite agree with you, and without mockery. Jim is also a noble man, in a different sense, if you will forgive the pun."

"It is unworthy of your wit."

"I cannot always be pyrotechnical. You need flint and steel to strike fire, and I find no flints amongst the idiots I have to entertain. Do you know, godmother,"--Leah stared into the fire--"I often wish that Lionel had remained the Duke."

"And your husband had been really a corpse? How like you!"

"Well," said the Duchess, cheerfully. "Jim might have been of some use if his,--what do you call those things?--oh, yes,--if his vortices had combined with other elements to grow into plants and sheep and cows, and generally do the sort of things which vortices are supposed to do. But as a Duke he is a failure."

"I don't exactly know what you mean by your heathen talk of vortices," snapped Lady Canvey. "Dust we are, and unto dust shall we return."

"Not Jim," protested Leah: "he would return to mud. He just looks as though he were made of sticky, clayey, stodgy mud."

"It is not original to abuse your husband."

"I know that; but you are too old-fashioned to admire originality."

Lady Canvey thumped with her stick vigorously. "Do not be so desperately sharp, Leah; you make my head ache. By the way, I have news for you about that nice boy you treated so badly."

"I have treated so many nice boys badly. Billy Richardson, Algy Turner, Harry Askew----"

"The last. He is to be married."

"I knew that a year ago. He left before Jim came home to make some Spanish creature his wife."

"Miss Mamie Mulrady does not sound like a Spanish name."

"That girl! You don't say so?" Leah looked genuinely surprised. "I suppose Señorita Fajardo would not have him. Perhaps she is waiting for Mr. Berring."

"Who is he?"

"Oh--er--a friend of mine;" she put up her muff to hide a smile.

"I know that U.S.A. heiress--a nice girl if she did not affect the Wild West of which she knows absolutely nothing. No doubt she thinks it chic to let Europeans hear the American eagle scream in the vernacular. Fancy!--and to Askew! A good match for him. I suppose he will call pounds, shillings and pence collectively dollars now that he is brother to George Washington."

"I don't think so. Mrs. Askew will probably be more English than the English."

"She might easily be that, since the English are mostly aliens nowadays. Well, I must go. Good-bye. I have enjoyed my hour. I always do with you, godmother. Such a clever tongue!"

"I am not leaving you any money, my dear."

"Please don't. Your grandson is finding that opera-dancer expensive. Give Canvey your savings, and his lady-love will dance professionally on your grave."

"I am glad cats don't talk," said the old woman, addressing no one in particular. "One is quite enough."

"Ah, they do talk then," laughed Leah, and having got the last word slipped away before Lady Canvey could rally her forces.

The Duchess, well wrapped up in expensive furs, stepped into the crisp air, thinking of Askew and his triple dip into the matrimonial lucky-bag. Lola Fajardo, Marjory the fixture, and Mamie Mulrady, not to speak of herself, whom he would have married had she cared to call herself by his unpretentious name. Certainly he was a man unfettered by prejudices in love affairs. Dark or fair, tall or short, and of any nationality, he adored them all in an entirely respectable fashion which included a ring and a parson.

"Though I don't believe the silly boy knows what love is," thought Leah, passing into Piccadilly--she was walking for exercise towards the Park; "but people of that ignorant sort always seem to land on their feet, like the cats Lady Canvey spoke of. I have landed very comfortably myself. I wonder why I can't love any one. How is it that no man can stir me into experience of the grand passion?"

Lately Leah had taken to analysing herself with fatal results. It seemed to her that she was shallow, since nothing in the world made any difference to her, or could make her feel. If Jim had dropped dead of the apoplectic fit which was waiting for him, she would merely have shrugged her shoulders; had the old Duke come back to claim the title, she would have had small regret in surrendering it. Everything seemed trivial and dull and vulgar. A remark made by Lionel occurred vividly to her at this moment. "You will never be truly happy," he had said, "until you are truly sorrowful." It was an unintentional epigram on the vicar's part, as he was dense, like all the Kaimes family; but it was clever enough to be true. Only--and here was the hopelessness of her life--

she saw no chance of becoming sorrowful in any degree, since her indifference nullified deep feelings of any sort.

"I suppose I shall have to run in this society circus till I die," she thought drearily. "What a clown's destiny!"

The mention of one lover naturally recalled the name of another, and by the time she passed Apsley House thoughts of Demetrius were running in her head. Not a word had she heard of him since his enforced journey to Siberia, via Paris, Havre, and Kronstadt. Katinka Aksakoff might have supplied information, only that Katinka, for reasons which Leah guessed rather than knew, had disappeared some nine months ago. According to M. Aksakoff, she was ruralising on his Volga estates, and her health forbade an exciting life. The Duchess did not quite believe this smooth explanation; and yet, at times, she fancied that the diplomatist might have taken her advice regarding the shepherding of an infatuated child.

It was, then, by one of those curious coincidences perfectly explicable to the psychological mind, that the man himself glided to her side. He looked as tall and lean as ever, but his eyes were less direct in their gaze, and he did not seem to exercise his former self-control. Leah and he had met but rarely during the past year, owing to her retirement consequent on mourning observances, and when they did meet each had avoided mention of that memorable afternoon in Paris. But when he crossed Leah's path thus unexpectedly, and when her head was filled with Demetrius and with the woman Demetrius did *not* love, she resolved to learn the worst or the best. After greeting, she began to speak with unconventional abruptness.

"Where is your daughter, M. Aksakoff?"

"On my Volga estate," he replied nervously; and from his averted eyes she made sure he was lying badly.

"In Siberia, you mean."

He turned with a start. "How do you know that?"

"I am right, then?"

Aksakoff clasped and unclasped two restless hands over the knob of his cane. "I really cannot say. I do not know why you should make that observation, after I have informed you of my daughter's whereabouts."

"I make it because I am a woman, and being such, I know that Katinka's love for that waxed-moustache creature will lead her--perhaps has led her--even into Siberian wilds."

Aksakoff stopped under the Achilles Statue and probed her mind with his eyes. "Do you really think so?"

"I do. Does my thought confirm facts?"

He resumed his walk with a troubled face. "I will be frank with you, madame, since we both know that Constantine Demetrius left Paris on that afternoon *en route* to Siberia."

"I know nothing of the sort," contradicted Leah, sharply.

"Yet you have just admitted that the man is in Siberia."

The Duchess laughed carelessly. "All Russians go as naturally to Siberia as cockneys to Margate. It's a kind of Bank Holiday with them, I suppose. Why not be frank with me?"

"Madame, I rather think that I should ask you that question." "I never answer questions," said Leah, coolly; "it saves a lot of trouble. But I make statements, and one is that Demetrius and the woman who loves him are in Siberia."

"Do you really think so?" said the diplomatist, repeating himself.

"I *do* think so; but surely you know?"

Aksakoff shook his head. "Katinka refused to marry her cousin Petrovitch, after the disappearance of Demetrius. She questioned me continually about him, and showed me the letter and enclosure which you had sent. A very diplomatic letter, if I may say so. I, of course, denied that I knew anything. She appeared to be satisfied; yet nine months ago she left my house--left this country----"

"To rusticate on your Volga estates."

"That was my excuse for her disappearance, and I beg of you, madame, to accept that excuse in society, for the sake of her good name and mine." She nodded, and he went on gravely: "I confess to you, madame, that I do not know where she is. You suggest Siberia; it is possible."

"I fancy so, seeing she is infatuated with the man. But how could she possibly learn that he was there?" Leah asked this question a trifle nervously, for there seemed to be something menacing in this strange behaviour of Katinka.

"Very easily. You sent her the letter supposed to have been written by Constantine Demetrius in Paris."

"What letter is that?" she asked obstinately.

The Russian's eyes flashed. "You must know, madame, and you do know, that the letter was forged for your safety."

The Duchess stopped abruptly, and became as ice in manner and speech. "You talk very strangely M. Aksakoff. My safety was never in danger, so far as I know. Your anxiety makes you indiscreet, and thinking so, I pardon the indiscretion."

Aksakoff, knowing that she would continue to feign ignorance, even in the face of aggressive facts, apologised with a bow, since it mattered very little. "In that forged letter"--he was determined to stick to the word--"was the name of Helfmann."

"Dr. Helfmann," she corrected.

"I gave him that degree, madame," said Aksakoff, dryly. "Helfmann is one of our secret police."

"Then you had no business to introduce such a creature into my rooms," said Leah, angrily.

"Pardon, the crime is twelve months old. To proceed. Katinka knew the real business of this man, and may have learned the truth, or enough of it, to make her journey to Siberia. Tomsk--yes, Tomsk!" He leaned his stick on the ground, his hands on the stick, and stared vaguely at the leafless trees. "Assuredly Tomsk."

"Is Dr. Demetrius there?"

Aksakoff nodded vaguely. "I wish you a good day, madame," said he, and turned away abruptly without raising his hat. The omission of a usual courtesy either betrayed his absence of mind, or showed what he truly thought of the Duchess of Pentland.

Leah, having a tender conscience, chose to assign the latter reason, and resolved to cut the man if he should dare to speak to her again. "But what can you expect from the Russian bear?" she said, resuming her walk.

It ended in Curzon Street. She and Jim rented the ducal residence to a wealthy American, and retained the smaller mansion, on the plea that their happiest days had been spent there. This excuse was, of course, a lie, but every one believed it, and said how touching it was to see that a Duke and a Duchess could be so human. And, after all, Leah really did like the cot of her humble days. It was pleasant to think that she had been "Lady Jim of Curzon Street," and had taken her title in that way, just like a peer in his own right. Sometimes she regretted that she was simply a Duchess, and not Lady Jim as of old. Then she had enjoyed life; now she found it excruciatingly dull. And it was all the fault of Demetrius, who had taught her more exciting methods of passing time than by killing it.

When in the drawing-room she recalled the conversation with Aksakoff, and began to think that there were troublesome days ahead. If Katinka had learned the truth through Helfmann, she was assuredly hovering round Tomsk in the hope of aiding Demetrius to escape. Should she be successful, as so determined girl might easily be, the man would return to this Island of Refuge breathing out vengeance of the direst. Leah had often contemplated a possible escape, followed by a certain return, and the contemplation invariably produced a shudder. Now that there seemed to be some ground that the man who knew all and would tell all might come to England, she was conscious of rising spirits. The feeling puzzled her.

"I ought to be shaking in my shoes," she reflected, "but I feel rather pleased than otherwise. I am spoilt for a life of cotton-wool and policemen at every corner. Danger is the sole thing which amuses me. That must be the explanation of my feeling jolly. I expect the heroes and heroines of cheap novels feel the same when they settle to a dull marriage after pages of hair-breadth escapes."

She was perfectly right. Leah Pentland was a bad woman mainly because she had been looked after too carefully. It required upheavals to bring the possible best out of her. She had behaved unscrupulously and basely in dealing with the insurance fraud, because that was the sole adventure which had come her way. But had the adventure been heroic and noble, she would have enjoyed it quite as much and would have struggled quite as bravely. The reckless way in which she pulled the whiskers of Death, when throned on her motor-car, was characteristic of the woman. Given danger, and she blossomed into a heroine, good or bad as circumstances served. At heart she was no vapid society woman, and her fiery pursuit of aimless pleasures merely showed her restless and masculine temperament. Danger braced her. At times, during her first taste of it, she had certainly given way from overstrained nerves; but now she was steeled to the worst that could happen, blooded to the open trail, baptised in unholy fire. If Katinka and Demetrius returned to London to give battle she was certain, absolutely certain, that she could beat them single-handed. Katinka she felt was the more dangerous of the two. Well, let her come, let him come, and victory be to the self-confident. Leah was so sure of her triumph that she did not even cast a thought to her hard-worked fetish. All the same, she kept the peacock's feather constantly in her pocket.

"Jim," said the Duchess that night, after a *tête-à-tête* dinner, when the pair reached the coffee stage, "let us sell up, drop our rank, and go to Canada."

The Duke stared, as well he might. "Good Lord!"

"Pooh! Why do you not say damn, as I feel inclined to do?"

Jim still stared with infantile blue eyes. "You say such queer things," he objected, fishing for a cigar.

"I should like to do them. Oh, why wasn't I born a real live man. I should have lived--lived--lived."

"Well," said Jim, stolidly clipping his weed, "you live now, don't you?"

"In a satin-lined, rose-wood jewel-box, if you call that living."

"I see what you mean," confessed the Duke, lighting up. "Same here. I was ever so much jollier aboard that dirty tramp. I slugged one of the crew--a Finn, he was--a hulking Finn, who thought I was a world-crawler, an' no man. They

carried him away in bits," finished Jim, with the battle-light in his blue eyes.

Leah looked at him curiously. "Jim, I really believe that we might understand one another. You and I are meant to be pals, and not a conventional man and wife. If you were only a backwoodsman I should adore you."

"An' do the washin', an' the scrubbing and the cookin'? I fancy I see you puttin' your back into that sort of work, Leah. Honey-pots are more in your line."

"I am as sick of honey-pots as you are. All this dressing and undressing, and court functions, and paltry pigeon-shooting, and skating at Prince's on sham ice, and yachting at Cowes in a floating hotel--oh, Lord, how it bores me!"

"You're always bored," grunted her husband, unsympathetically. "Can you wonder at it, when I have to go round and round and round in a decorated ring like a trick-pony? If I were a woman it would be satisfactory, no doubt."

"Well," said Jim, obtusely, "ain't you a woman?"

Leah sprang from her chair and flung out her arms with a deep chest breath. "I am a man," she announced, in resonant contralto tones. "I feel like one, anyhow. Didn't some one say there was no sense in this grown-up business. Well, I am like that. Up to the time you went after Lola Fajardo I did enjoy things all round, but somehow I feel as though the bottom had dropped out of creation."

"Drop Lola Fajardo also, then," growled the Duke, colouring. "I never went near her."

"Because you couldn't. The serpent in the bamboo--eh, Jim?"

"I don't care anything for her now."

Leah looked at him steadily. "I am glad of that, because you belong to me--to me."

"And much you think of me!"

"I think you are extremely selfish, and desperately weak with even ugly women, and quite a brute when you don't get your own pretty way, and--in short, you are a man, a glorious lord of creation." "Oh, drop rottin'."

"I am not rotting, as you delicately put it. Like myself, this sugary civilisation has spoiled you. If you had to earn your bread I should respect you, Jim. I might even love you. Yes"--she considered for a moment--"I daresay it might come to that."

Jim was growing bewildered. "What does all this mean?" was his very natural interrogation.

His wife bewildered him still more by acting in a way which made him gasp. She walked round the table, and, standing at his back, placed her arms round his neck. "I'll tell you, Jim. I have just found out by my very own self that you and I are cave-people pitchforked into the wrong century. We live ten thousand years too late--just think of it--ten thousand years of life and death. Let us go back to the mud, Jim, and take up the life where we left it when you were killed, spearing that mammoth."

"Leah!" His head was thrown back, and his eyes stared upward in alarm.

"I know what you think, but I am as sane as you are, and ten times cleverer. No;" she loosened her arms from his neck and locked them behind her. "Look at me, Jim. Am I a doll?"

The startled Duke wheeled his chair and stared at her brilliant eyes, no longer hard and cold, at her stately figure, her splendid red hair, her clearly cut face flushed and animated. "You're a rippin' fine woman," said he, his sluggish pulses stirred.

"So you think--so the world thinks. Yet I have to live in a wadded box like a wax doll. I want to get out of that box--it stifles me, chokes me. I am sick of the tents of Shem, and wish to house under those of Esau. You and I will take the privilege of rank and be eccentric. As pals we'll get on much better than as a Mayfair man and wife of the wrong sort, beyond the borders of this horrid civilisation that is. Buy a yacht, Jim--a tramp hulk with those triple expansion engines you told me about, and let us make for the South Seas. There's a clear path down Channel. Let us explore, let us venture into the Naked Lands and exploit the fringes of the empire. I want to live--to live, you understand. Oh," she cried almost fiercely, "can't you understand?"

"No," said Jim, truthfully, and as stolid as ever; "you have your rank to think of, and my name."

The fire died out of Leah's eyes, the colour from her face, the ring from her voice; even her figure seemed to dwindle from that of a tragedy queen into a conventional Belgravian wife. Then she laughed shortly, and in a way which Jim did not approve of in his Duchess.

"I beg your pardon, Pentland," said Leah, using his title to mark the far recoil. "I took you for a man: you are nothing but a society gramophone."

Jim would have resented this contemptuous description, but that she gave him no time to formulate an idea in his slow-thinking brain. With swift steps she left the room and ascended to her boudoir; there, after locking the door, with a strength which disordered the lock, she flung herself face downward on the sofa, and cried quietly, passionately, with that suppressed anger and grief and rage which rends the body and brain so terribly. Jim could not, would not understand. He was what he always had been--the sole Gadarene pig into which a devilkin had not entered.

"Can I never put fire into that clay?" sobbed Leah, savagely.

Only God could have done that, and she did not believe in God. But the fetish was in her pocket.

CHAPTER XXXI

Leah made no farther attempt to decivilise Jim. He was too engrossed in Egyptian flesh-pots to set out for the Promised Land of splendid adventure and Elizabethan enterprise. In his clay there did lurk a spark of that Promethean fire which, melting meaner aims into one passionate purpose to explore the world and exploit the world, has made England great. Unfortunately, it could not be fanned into anything resembling a flame. The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks,

and the garlic of civilisation appealed to him insistently, and even if he did betake himself to roaming unfenced wastes, he certainly would not number a wife amongst his luggage. Moreover--and this she knew by instinct--his basic qualities were markedly those of the homing kind. This being so, a few months of tent and road would be used by him as a relish to increased appreciation of the cedar chambers and painted halls wherein his cradle had been rocked. It was clearly impossible to make a silken purse out of this particular sow's ear, so Jim drowsed very contentedly beside the fire, while his wife, out of sheer ennui, chased Piccadilly butterflies, or sat in her ducal niche to be bored with social adoration.

But one thing rendered life endurable to Leah Pentland at this juncture, and that was her coming opportunity to exhaust the enjoyable. Now that the days of compulsory sorrow were ended she had plenty to do, and ample funds for the doing. At Firmingham the new king and queen celebrated Christmas, new style, with celebrants who were but doubtfully informed as to the why and wherefore of the festival. Certainly, Jim and his Comus-rout invaded church on the holy-day, and yawned impatiently through liturgy and sermon; but this was a concession to county prejudices. Leah would tolerate no Santa Claus tree, no Druidical decorations, and no modernised mumming of the Middle Ages. These out-of-date enjoyments were replaced by political and poetical tableaux, by amateur renderings of smart French and dismal Russian plays, and by the kitchen lancers when riotous cake-walks palled. Imported musicians, in an incorrect foreign uniform, played Greig's melodies, Tschaikowsky's weird sound-poems, and that nerve-exhausting music of the present by Herr Wagner which has now arrived at its future. For the uncouth carol of innocent Victorian days was substituted Sousa's clanging marches, comic songs, clean but inane, and catchy airs from the newest vaudeville, miscalled musical-comedy. Out-of-door sports included skating on artificial ice--since it was a green Christmas--motor-car races, attempts at golf and polo-playing, riding, driving, and sauntering flirtations, while bridge circulated the guests' money at odd moments. It was truly wonderful to see how completely these nominal Christians had substituted a heathen festival of some sort for the orthodox pleasures of tradition. The participants in the orgie were all smart and all *blasés*, perfectly dressed and triumphantly selfish. With that careful avoidance of spoken appreciation which marks the modern trifler, they took leave of the Duchess with the remark that her notion of what Yule-tide should be was not half bad. A week of dull Sundays, so to speak, had been got through capitally.

"Nothing frumpish about the thing," pronounced Mrs. Penworthy, who had been asked to gratify Jim, and who had been found woefully wanting in snap. "Every one was quite up to scratch. Leah Pentland did simply ripping off her own."

The little woman was not talking an unknown language, for the latest successor to Algy understood her excellently well. She spoke the gibberish of those in a hurry, which she had taken some pains to acquire. The very few words in the dictionary used by the fashionable were dropped into the melting-pot, and came out in ungrammatical lumps of misused adjectives and verbs with a paucity of pronouns and prepositions. Mrs. Penworthy, whose sense of humour was strong, had proposed that Lionel should translate the Bible into this time-saving vernacular, so that its spiritual meaning could be arrived at by those who thought the verse of Milton and the prose of Bacon starchy.

"Wouldn't hear of it," said she, to Algy's latest successor, while munching American sweets in the up-going train. "Told him it would be spiffing to fetch the psalms up to mark, but he didn't catch on somehow. Wonder the Duchess can stand him, with his horrid correctness. She's fond of doing herself well."

"Thought the Duchess had rather a shoppin' face," replied the man, meaning that his hostess had looked worried.

"Don't knew why she should. Got heaps of cake to chew. Might be she missed Demetrius."

"Wheresey hang out?"

"Don't know. Went prancing off on his own. Got a puff?"

The inheritor of Algy's shoes provided the lady with a cigarette. "Fancied she cottoned to th' Askew chap," he remarked, striking a match.

"Sure she did--oh, rather! Aksakoff let on to me 'bout the boy jumping Paris to get fixed--British Embassy fixings, you know. Leah Pentland didn't bring it off somehow. Lucky for her, seeing Jim wasn't a goner. We really could not have received her," ended Mrs. Penworthy; then, aware that she had lapsed into decent English, corrected her mistake: "Mean we couldn't have let her chip into our game."

"Like th' Duchess?" inquired her companion, languidly.

"Don't know, quite. Saucy and swagger and all that. Freezes a bit--what? Talks like a book, you know. Awfully expensive rattle."

The man nodded. "Thought she wasn't up to dick. Daresay she'll spin along on her own freely, when the hump's off."

"Hump? She hasn't got the hump, or the needle either."

"Very saucy hump," insisted the male linguist--"quite birdish. Sorry the old Duke an' Frith hopped, maybe."

"How very unnatural!" sighed Mrs. Penworthy, reverting to English in her disgust. "Quite too awfl to think how luck hooks on to her. Really makes one wish to be a bad woman, to see how she lands the salmon," she finished more creditably.

Algy's latest successor was right, for once in his life of mistakes. Leah was not entirely her own brilliant self, notwithstanding that successful inauguration of the new era. The early excitement consequent on the conversation with Aksakoff had died away, and again she felt the old haunting fear of the possible. But this absurd mood, she hoped, would pass away when the test came. Facing her enemies, male and female, she would doubtless fight like a cornered rat, and would conquer from sheer determination not to be beaten. Nevertheless, this period of suspense was trying to one who had no listener, and who could not talk herself into heroics by mere monologues. A confidant was necessary only to the weaker part of her character, since her deepest feelings advised her that pure strength must needs be solitary. She was an oak, not an ivy, and unknowingly agreed with Emerson as to the vitiating effects of comfortable circumstances. "Cast the bantling on the rocks," sang the Seer of Concord, and Leah indubitably squirmed thereon, as Jim had informed her in his simple way in a conversation now--apparently--some centuries old.

"Every month's a year now," sighed Leah, wearily.

However, pending a possible fight for her social throne, the Duchess made the very best of the passing hour. After the pagan entertainment of the winter solstice, she endured the gorging Christianity of a few belated country-houses, whose inhabitants were still eating in honour of a Birth which had taken place some two thousand years ago, as a Book they seldom read assured them. She went alone to these Vitellian feasts, as Jim was off the chain until such time as he

would be needed to play Duke during the season. The aristocratic prodigal's reformation was but skin-deep, and the late whitewash soon wore off to show the unchanged black fleece, since he began with the zeal of a newly uniformed subaltern to poach on various matrimonial manors. Mrs. Penworthy he had naturally grown tired of, as she preferred syndicates to partnerships, so he placed his tried affections on Lady Sandal, who was horsey and doggy and tremendously expensive on account of her betting craze. She and Jim talked kennels and stables, discussing their very unplatonic loves between times, and found each other kindred guttersnipes of the earthly, sensual kind. Leah, speedily informed by a feminine sidewind of this new amusement of Jim's four-and-twenty leisure hours, did not object, or even hint her knowledge of his backsliding. It kept him out of her way, and Lord Sandal, a Nero with limitations, who dwelt in a superlative glass house, was not likely to submit his wife's latest sin to the fierce light which beats upon the divorce court witness-box. Nothing could be more satisfactory to a woman who wanted complete freedom, and Leah again thanked the agreeable fetish for making straight her very crooked paths.

But all this time the sword dangled over Leah's head, and its menace became so insupportable that she wished the single hair would give way, to decide brusquely for hit or miss. Her desire was gratified on the very night when she made her curtsy to the Sovereigns. Having created an immense impression, the Duchess, with eyes as radiant as the family diamonds crowning her imperial head, returned at midnight to her home in the company of a purring husband. Jim really felt that Leah had upheld the family name with her insolent beauty, and moreover, was quite the grandest-looking woman in London, or out of it. When they arrived in their own drawing-room, and she had emerged a royal court butterfly from the chrysalis of her cloak, he turned abruptly and took her in his arms with the hug of a bear.

"Leah," he murmured hoarsely--"oh, Leah!" and kissed her fair on the mouth with the kiss of Pan.

But only once did he exercise that connubial privilege, for she released herself roughly with a sense of intolerable outrage. "Isn't it rather late in the day?" she asked, scornful and angry.

"Pon my word, Leah, I'd be a good husband to you if you would only let me."

"Oh, as an over-married Turk I am sure you would be admirable. I know you disapprove of monogamy."

"What the deuce is that?"

"Something that the Church encourages and society shirks. The Sandal woman can explain the objection."

Jim winced at her knowledge of his latest love. "You said that I belonged to you," he reminded her sulkily.

"Officially. May I ask the reason for this sudden devotion?"

"You look so rippin'."

"Thanks for the belated compliment. I am aware that your love is dependent upon the eye."

"An' what else should it be dependent upon?"

"The heart may have something to do with it, you know--or rather, you do not know. Since our conversation when I asked you to buy a yacht I have given up trying to educate you in the affections."

"I'll buy a yacht now--a dozen yachts, to please you."

"Oh," said the Duchess, with a cold smile; "so that Epsom-Newmarket woman has been nasty."

Jim uttered a bad word under his breath, and flung out of the room in a pet. "I'll play at the club till all's blue," he called out while banging the door, and a minute later she heard the butler whistle for a hansom.

The deserted wife was perfectly aware that Jim's sudden admiration arose from pride of proprietorship, and objected to be cajoled into righteous matrimonial principles on such terms. As it was scarcely one o'clock she seated herself to consider if it would be worth while to lift her uxorious pig out of the mire he loved. A footman with a salver interrupted these creditable meditations.

"A lady called twice to see your Grace this evening," said the man, presenting a visiting-card, "and has now called again."

The Duchess lifted her eyebrows as she lifted the card. "At this hour?"

"The lady says her business is important, your Grace."

"What business----?" here her eyes fell on the card, and a swift alteration of expression changed her into a different and harder woman. "Ask Mademoiselle Aksakoff to join me here," she ordered abruptly.

The sword had not yet dropped, but the hair could not suspend it much longer. Katinka was in England, in London, in her house. And Demetrius? What of him? Why had he not come also? Leah asked herself these questions with brutal directness, resolved to shirk nothing of the imminent danger. After the first dash of dismay her nerves braced themselves for the ordeal, and she advanced to greet Mademoiselle Aksakoff with a conventional smile, meaning nothing and yet everything. This gave place to an amazed look when she beheld the haggard antagonist with whom she had to cross swords.

"My--dear--girl! What have you been doing with yourself?"

She might well ask. Katinka was no longer the demure nun, but a fierce, goaded creature of the feline tribe. Dressed quietly in unrelieved black, hatted, cloaked, and gloved, she presented the appearance of one sorely tried in the fiery furnace of affliction, and less lucky than Daniel's brethren. That thin worn face, those hollow eyes, the wry mouth, the dark hair plentifully bestreaked with grey--she was demoralised, uncanny, and aggressively cruel. In a flash the Duchess knew that this untimely visitor knew the truth, and was prepared to do battle. No quarter would be given by Katinka Aksakoff, and Leah, with a deep breath, braced herself for an Armageddon duel. The contrast between the dowdy Russian girl and the magnificently arrayed woman lay entirely in the garb; otherwise they were cats of the wildest. Their faces took on a marked resemblance; a stealthy, cunning, sly, guarded expression effaced their ordinary looks. If Katinka's eyes gleamed dangerously, so did those of Leah; if Leah held herself like a pantheress about to spring, so did Katinka. In that splendid room two pre-historic creatures were about to fight over the male. Here indeed was woman, the female of man. Civilisation was nowhere.

"You know why I have come?" asked Katinka, in a voice as hard as her eyes, and those might have been fashioned of granite.

Leah, with flattened ears, so to speak, professed ignorance. She did not intend to criticise until fully aware of facts. A shake of her head conveyed the denial and brought forth one bitter word.

"Liar!"

The Duchess glanced towards the door, remembering that the servants had not yet retired and might be within earshot.

"Would you mind speaking in a lower tone?" she suggested between her teeth, for the insult struck home.

"Sit down," ordered Katinka, imperiously.

"I prefer to stand," retorted her antagonist, fighting for the inch.

Mademoiselle Aksakoff advanced one step and her eyes probed those of the Duchess. Without words the situation was adjusted, and in Leah's favour, for the Russian suddenly sat down with a quick, indrawn breath. By that action the woman who had done the wrong knew that she was the stronger of the two, and a tyrannical instinct to bully the weak rose hotly in her breast.

"What do you mean by coming at this late hour and misbehaving?" she demanded harshly.

"You know well what I mean."

"Pardon me, I never profess to understand the vagaries of a madwoman."

At this brutal speech Katinka's hand shot into her pocket, but Leah did not move.

"A weapon?" she asked sneeringly; "that would be quite in keeping with your blatant nationality. Foreigners are so fond of the melodramatic."

The girl withdrew her hand quietly. "You are too poor a creature to kill, Lady James."

Leah smiled at the old title, and passed the remark with a contemptuous shrug.

"Later on, perhaps--who knows?"

"Who indeed? It is impossible to foresee what an hysterical lunatic will do. Do you propose to shoot or stab me, or to blow me up? I understand that bombs are favoured in your happy country."

The crude hostility of the speech was plainly intended to infuriate the Slav-woman, but it missed the mark aimed at. Katinka looked at the mocker gravely.

"How afraid you are!"

Leah shrugged again; the remark was too futile to be commented upon.

"Yes, you are," went on the other, a trifle roused; "else you would have me turned out by your servants."

"Later on, perhaps--who knows?" repeated the Duchess, using the girl's own words; then continued soothingly, "No; I shall not call the servants and make a scandal, since your father is my friend."

"Your accomplice, Lady James."

"What an unpleasant word, and how very unsuitable!"

"For what you did in Paris."

"I did nothing in Paris to deserve such a word. Perhaps you mean something else. You foreigners know the grammar of English, but rarely the meaning of words. I remarked the same defect in your father."

"I have no father."

"Indeed, I have not yet heard of his death."

"Your misunderstanding of my meaning is pretence."

"Ignorance, I assure you. And as it grows late and I am tired, may I ask you to explain your business?"

"I can do so in one word--Demetrius." Katinka rose to give full force of expression to the name, and her voice rose with the utterance.

Leah remained perfectly calm, and indulged in badinage. "Demetrius? Oh yes, that horrid little man with the waxed moustache: a doctor or a chemist, wasn't he?"

"Your lover!"

"Oh no. I have no use for that sort of person; if I had I should certainly not pick one out of the gutter. Demetrius? Yes," she went on musingly, but watchful of her enemy, "I had almost forgotten him. He went to St. Petersburg, didn't he? And you loved him, I remember. A queer choice I thought at the time. Well, have you married him?"

"It grows late and you are tired," mocked Katinka, successfully keeping her temper, and thereby disappointing the Duchess; "we had better not waste time."

Leah yawned. "It seems to me that we have been doing nothing else since you came in."

"Demetrius is in England."

"Really! How very interesting! As doctor or Prince?"

"As an escaped Siberian felon."

"No!" Leah's face assumed a skilful expression of mingled pity and horror. "Poor little man! He was mad to go to Russia. I thought so when I read his letter, which I sent you."

"The forged letter."

"Don't be silly; one would think you were on the stage."

Katinka bit her lip to prevent furious speech, and locked her arms behind her as though she feared lest temper should engender violence. Leah noted her expression, however, and retreated towards the bell.

"You are talking nonsense," she said coldly, "and much as I respect your father, I shall certainly summon the servants to put you out unless you go at once."

"I shall not go, and you shall not order your servants to put me out," cried Katinka, fiercely. "I defy you to press the button of the bell."

With a feeling that the girl had scored on this occasion Leah withdrew her hand, making the usual excuse: "For your father's sake I spare you the indignity."

"I repeat that I have no father."

"And I repeat that I am tired. What do you want?"

"You must arrange with me to see Constantine."

"Who is Constantine?"

"You know."

"I do not."

"You do."

Their eyes met, and this time Leah won the victory over a woman obviously worn out.

"Constantine is Demetrius," explained the Russian, in a fatigued voice and closing her eyes. "Oh, my God!" She dropped into her seat with a low wail and covered her face.

Leah heard the clock strike the half-hour through the sobs of her visitor. She was absolutely sure that Katinka was at her mercy, and wished to dismiss her, beaten and crushed. But first it was necessary to learn why Demetrius had not come also. Leah moved swiftly towards the broken creature, and laid a firm hand on her heaving shoulder.

"My dear----"

She got no further. With the elusive spring of a wild animal Katinka flung off the hand, reared, and struck out. The blow fell fairly on Leah's mouth, and she found

herself mopping up the blood of a deeply-cut lip before she had any clear idea of what had taken place.

"Oh, you liar, you beast, you devil!" cried the Russian, with the savagery of a Kalmuck tent-woman. "I could kill you--kill you."

"Mad," mumbled Leah, with the lace handkerchief to her lips.

"I am sane," retorted the other, swiftly. "I know all. You lured Constantine to Paris; you sold him to my father to hide your iniquity. I saw Helfmann the spy; do you hear--the spy! I bribed him; it took months to bribe him, but in the end I bought the truth. My father--shame to my father--drugged Constantine at your table, and Helfmann as a sham doctor took him to Havre, to Kronstadt, to Moscow. The Grand Duke Sergius"--here she spat when mentioning the hated name--"yes, he, that beast of beasts, sent him to Siberia for life; ar-r-r--for life! do you hear, Judas, Jezebel, animal that you are! I followed there; I followed the man I loved----"

"And who did not love you," muttered the Duchess, rocking with the pain of her swollen and bleeding lips. She had seated herself by this time, and did not seek to stem the torrents of insults.

"And why?" Katinka flung back her head and her nostrils dilated. "Because you stole his heart that he might do your evil bidding. But he loves me now--with all his heart and soul he loves me now. I went to Tomsk to aid his escape; I followed to Sakhalin. I waited and waited, eating my heart out. Oh, my heart!" she laid her hand on her breast; "oh, my breaking heart! We escaped--he did--I did; we escaped. Do you hear, you who sold him? There were months of terror and sorrow and cruel cold. But God was good; He was kinder than man, more merciful than you, who damned a soul to that frozen hell. God--the good God, whom I adore and worship," she fell on her knees, striking her hands together--"He aided us to reach the waiting ship of Strange, and----"

"Strange!" Leah rose, shaken and sick. "Strange!"

Katinka leaped up to face her. "The man you bribed with six thousand pounds to take your sin on his soul. I know all about your wickedness; Strange knows; Constantine knows. We will tell the world what we know; and you, shamed, disgraced, beaten, hounded out of your world--ah, down will you fall--fall--unless----"

"Unless?" Leah, gripping a chair and swaying, looked up. "Unless?"

"You come to Southend to see Constantine."

"I refuse."

"Then I tell everything. I go to your husband." Leah, in spite of her pain, laughed at the idea. "I go to your police. I tell----"

"Stop, I shall come, since you insist upon it."

"I do--Constantine likewise. He is ill--very ill; his eyes are blinded by the glare of the snows whither you sent him; he is--oh, my poor angel, my patient saint!--he is----" Stopping abruptly, she looked with an evil eye at the woman she had so shamefully marked. "I will leave you to see the wreck you have made of him. You will come?"

The Duchess nodded. "But I can explain all," she mumbled.

"Explain it, then, to Constantine," said her enemy, contemptuously. "I go now. Meet me to-morrow at Liverpool Street Station--at the barrier. We can go to Southend by the five o'clock train. Constantine is on board Strange's ship, which lies off Southend."

"Ah! Then you mean to----"

"Carry you away? No; you are not worth it."

Leah's indomitable courage, quelled for the moment, blazed up fiercely. She forgot her pain, her disfigured mouth, and faced Katinka in a blind rage. "You--you----" she clenched her hands, and panted like a spent runner. "You have said all; I agree to all."

The Russian looked at the wounded mouth with a cruel, calm smile, then sauntered deliberately to the door. There she smiled still more serenely, pointed a mocking finger at her enemy's wry mouth, and slipped away without a word, and almost without a sound.

Leah sprang to the mirror. Had this woman marred her beauty? The mouth was swollen, the lips still bleeding; there were wounds within and without, and a rather loose tooth. Leah could have howled aloud at the shame, the humiliation of her defeat. That she should be struck, beaten, mastered--she of all women; she--she! "Ar-r-r! Augh!" she cried, but softly, mindful of danger. Then the thought came to her that she would have to account for her damaged mouth, and with the thought came enlightenment. Passing quickly out of the room, she ascended the stairs rapidly to her room. Half-way up she stumbled and fell. The

footman, hearing the fall, ran up and lifted her. He saw that her mouth was bleeding. Natural enough--oh, perfectly natural! "It's them beastly long trains," explained the footman in the servants' hall.

CHAPTER XXXII

"Never knew you to tumble before, Leah," grumbled the Duke, next morning, when admitted into his wife's bedroom.

"Accidents will happen," murmured the Duchess, rather lamely, and too much shaken to be original. "I can't talk, Jim--my mouth is still sore."

"What can you expect if you go a mucker? An' th' season's startin', too. You'll not be able to show with that swellin'."

"A week at Firmingham will put me right. Katinka Aksakoff is coming down also."

"Heard she looked in last night. What made her call at so late an hour?"

"She's worried about her father," lied Leah, prepared for the question.

"Had an almighty row with him over that bounder doctor, I expect."

Leah nodded languidly. "M. Aksakoff has gone to Southend. I take his daughter with me there, to make peace."

"Southend? There's a hole! What's he doin' in that roost?"

"How should I know? I'll reconcile the two if I can, and Katinka can be my companion at Firmingham."

"Dull company," confessed Jim, candidly; "she never could flirt."

"That will be no drawback," said his wife, dryly. "Go away, please."

"What lie am I to tell 'bout your sickness?"

"Tell the truth, by way of a novelty; or if you prefer a lie, say that I have appendicitis. One must be fashionable, even in diseases."

"All right," said Jim, too obtuse to note the irony. "Sorry you're so ill. You've made an awf'l mess of yourself: women will wear such confounded trains. Goo'bye at present. I'll look in at Firmingham durin' your week of penance;" and, talking himself out of the room, Jim went about his ordinary nefarious occupations, feeling that he had behaved as a husband should.

The Duchess turned wearily on her pillows and winced. Not with pain, for her mouth, though still swollen, was much less tender. It was the prospect before her that hurt. In the evening a difficult interview had to be got through somehow, and her brain began to forecast the probable result. If Katinka could be believed it would scarcely prove to be a pleasant one. Demetrius apparently intended to punish her by blackening an unsoiled character. "Such a nasty, revengeful spirit," thought Leah, feeling ill-used and depressed.

But, after all, what could the man say likely to incriminate her, seeing that she had moved amongst the pitfalls of the plot as delicately as Agag? Demetrius had conceived and executed the entire scheme, and what he could say would only fit in neatly with Strange's confession, which the public already knew and condemned. Her hand could not be traced either in his Parisian journey or in the drugging of the tea. How was she to know that Helfmann was a police spy, or that the letter assuring her of the doctor's intended return to Russia had been deftly forged? Her surface behaviour, at least, was perfectly honest, and would bear even the scrutiny of an interviewer. She could, taking a broad view of unpleasant circumstances, defy the creature; but nevertheless felt instinctively that it would be unwise to dare him to do his worst. Such a plotting, narrow-minded, sneaking beast would ruin himself to ruin her, and mud, if thrown persistently, was apt to stick even to the whitest robe. What a shame that this animal should so persecute her! How hard on a kind-hearted woman, whose sin, as he called it, was merely an error of judgment. By the time Leah finished her reflections her frame of mind was one of much-injured innocence.

Later in the day, when driving to Liverpool Street Station to keep her hated appointment, Leah half decided to call on Aksakoff. But second thoughts assured her that his intervention was quite out of the question. Were Demetrius to be arrested in British waters the Radical press would howl, and nasty meddling politicians would ask unnecessary questions in the Commons. It would be wiser, after all, to fight alone and to the bitter end. If Demetrius thought she would give in, Demetrius was entirely mistaken. He had yet to learn that she could be as nasty as hitherto she had been nice. But he was horridly ungrateful, as all men were. In this way did the arch-plotter salve her conscience and compose her mind.

It was darkish when the brougham arrived at the station, and Leah, glancing about under the electric lamps, saw Katinka waiting at the ticket-barrier. For the benefit of an inquisitive maid and an observant groom she addressed her gaily, though it was not easy to speak with still aching lips.

"You *are* punctual," said the Duchess, pressing an unwilling hand with ostentatious warmth. "Excuse my speaking much. I fell on the stairs last night after you left and hurt my mouth."

"I commiserate with you, madame," replied Katinka, sarcastically.

"So good of you. I hope M. Aksakoff will not expect me to chatter."

"My father?" echoed the girl, staring.

"He's at Southend, isn't he?" said Leah, impatiently; "at least, you told me so last night. I have instructed my maid to go on to Farningham, while we travel straight to Southend. Such a cockney place, isn't it? Then we can get back--oh, about what time?"

"Say eleven o'clock," returned the Russian, grimly. She now saw through the clever comedy which was being played.

"You understand, Marie," said Leah, turning to her maid, who was all ears and eyes; "see that the brougham is sent in time. Come with me, dear--there's a reserved compartment--at least, I ordered one. Curl, go and look."

Thus prattling to deceive her domestics, Leah adjusted a very thick veil, which hid from the public a face whose expression was quite at variance with her sweet

nothings. When the two entered the carriage and the train was moving slowly out of the station, Katinka burst into a harsh laugh.

"I congratulate you, Lady James; you should have been a conspirator."

"So your dear father told me. Compliments run in your family, apparently. Surely you do not blame me for putting things right with my servants. They might think it queer, otherwise, and one cannot be too careful with such creatures."

"I fail to see what good your exceedingly clever explanations will do. Constantine intends to speak out."

"What about?" asked Leah, chafing, and throwing up her veil to manage the girl more easily with her dominating eyes.

Katinka, always fiery, and with slack nerves after her Siberian experiences, almost lost what temper she had left. "Need we keep on your comedy, madame?"

"I'm sure I do not know what you mean. One would think that I wished to deceive people, the way you talk. And after what I have done for you, too--it's most ungrateful."

"And pray what have you done, Lady James?"

"Don't call me Lady James; your stupid mistakes get on my nerves. Done? Why, I pretended to fall on the stair to excuse the state of my mouth. Had I been a nasty, spiteful creature such as you are, I should have given you in charge for assault."

"Give me in charge now," sneered the girl.

"I might. Don't drive me into a corner."

"You are inconsistent. If you have done nothing wrong, how can I drive you into the corner you speak of?"

"Because you are a monomaniac," retorted the Duchess, angrily; "you seem to think that I am the cause of the doctor's exile. I, of all people, who would not hurt a fly."

"You would hurt a dozen flies if anything was to be gained," snapped the other, irritably. "You betrayed my Constantine."

"I did nothing of the sort, as he will understand when he hears what I have to say."

"Hearing and believing are two different things, Lady James."

Leah shrugged away the speech. "Of course, you are prejudiced, because Demetrius loves me."

Mademoiselle Aksakoff fetched a long, deep breath. "Do not try me too far."

"Do you intend to assault me again?"

"No; I even apologise for the blow. I told Constantine this morning of my interview, and he said that I was wrong. It is for him to deal you justice and punishment."

"Punishment! Justice!" Leah laughed aloud in sheer rage at her inability to parry these insults. "And for what, pray?"

"Constantine will tell you."

"In that case I do not wish a second-hand judgment from you."

The two glared at one another, venomous and defiant. As usual, the younger woman's eyes fell first, and she retreated to the furthest corner of the carriage, while Leah, pulling down her veil, tried to face this most disagreeable situation. Not another word did they exchange until the ducal servants branched off at Shenfield Junction, and they had to be publicly amiable. Then, again, silence reigned until their destination was reached. By that time Leah was more her old insolent self, and disposed to be unpleasant.

"Will you drive or walk?" asked Katinka, coldly, when they alighted on the Southend platform.

"Walk, of course. I do not mind at all being recognised, since I have come to see your father on board this yacht."

"Captain Strange would be flattered by your description."

The Duchess laughed contemptuously as they stepped into the street. "I am scarcely responsible for M. Aksakoff's notion of a yacht. Foreigners are so ignorant."

"They are not so clever as Englishmen--or Englishwomen."

"Except in trickery and blackmail, where they surpass them," retorted Leah, her petty rage insisting on having the last word.

Katinka permitted her the gratification, and they walked the whole length of the High Street in grim silence.

At a rude quay jutting from the beach of the lower town they boarded a disreputable boat, rowed by two pirates and steered by a third. The night was starry but moonless, comparatively calm, and noticeably chilly. Leah shivered as the boat made for a vivid green riding-light, which shone, an emerald star, no great distance from the shore. But her shiver might have been an admission of dread. Katinka took it to be so, and smiled in a gratified way as her enemy climbed the side of the steamer, which was a veritable gypsy of the sea, untidy, dirty, and decidedly questionable in honest eyes. Strange did the honours, loud-tongued and raucous.

"Guess it do my eyes good to see your Grace," was his welcome.

"Hold your tongue, and don't use my title," she replied furiously.

Strange's milk of human kindness turned sour on the instant. "I ain't high-falutin' enough, I s'pose. Pity I ain't a dandy skipper of sorts, all hair-oil an' giddy gold tags."

Leah turned her back without deigning a reply, and looked inquiringly at Katinka. The girl, with an enigmatic smile on her wan face, led the way down some greasy stairs, into a stuffy state-room, and opened the narrow door of a side-cabin. Leah entered and heard the lock click behind her. Evidently Mademoiselle Aksakoff did not think it judicious to remain.

"But I daresay her ear is at the key-hole," thought the Duchess, contemptuously. She was trying to preserve her self-respect by heaping obloquy on her rival, but

scarcely succeeded as well as she desired. Then she said "Ugh!" twice and with emphasis.

The interjections were not meant for the girl's possible eavesdropping, but to show Leah's disgust at the close atmosphere of the cabin. It was a nauseous, musky, sickly odour, which reminded her only too vividly of the monkey-house at the Zoo. Neither light nor air entered the den, save through the round port-hole over the bunk, which was unscrewed. But even the briny sea-breeze blowing softly could not do away with that thick, tainted atmosphere which had provoked the visitor's exclamations. With her handkerchief to her mouth Leah's eyes strove to become accustomed to the faint light. She saw dimly a heap of blankets, but no form was visible beneath, and no face was to be seen. Possible trickery occurred to her, until a voice came heavily through the fetid gloom. Then, in spite of its odd, strangled sound, she felt instinctively that Demetrius was buried somewhere under the clothes.

"You will excuse the absence of a lamp, madame. My eyes are half blinded with the snow-glare, and very tender."

"How strangely you speak!" remarked Leah, involuntarily.

"A sore throat," was the hoarse reply. "Siberia, as madame must be aware, is not a summer climate." The wheezy sound ended in a kind of piping whistle.

"I am sorry you have suffered," said the Duchess, at a loss what to say. "Ugh, the smell!" she thought, seating herself on a locker, and feeling almost too sick to control her faculties.

"Madame is too good."

A dangerous pause ensued, while Leah wondered what was about to happen. The man assuredly was Demetrius, and Demetrius was assuredly extremely ill. It was within the bounds of possibility that he might spring up and kill her. The thought did not trouble her overmuch. So dangerous a business had to be faced undauntedly, and she kept down her womanly weakness with masculine strength. During those slow minutes she could hear the lapping of the waters, on which the vessel rocked; hear also the laboured breathing of the sick man. This stopped for a moment, and then did she hear her own easy breaths. Demetrius evidently heard them also, and had paused to listen. He laughed weakly, softly, clucking like a fowl.

"Madame is very brave."

"I'm frightened to death," she assured him, to excite his pity.

"Your breathing tells me otherwise. I am certain, madame, that your pulse beats regularly, and that your nerves are entirely in order."

"Is this a consultation?" she asked coolly.

"It is the farewell of two who loved," murmured the hard, thick voice, muffled by the blankets. "That is, madame, of one who loved and of one who did not; and therein, as M. Heine truly remarks, lies the tragedy of existence."

"Demetrius--Constantine." Leah felt that she must come to the point and get rapidly through the interview, if only to escape from the sickening atmosphere. "Katinka accuses me of betraying you."

"Well, madame?"

"I did not. I swear I did not."

"Indeed? Mademoiselle Aksakoff is doubtless mistaken."

"In a way. She wishes to save her father from blame."

"As a good daughter should. Will you explain further, madame?"

"Certainly. I came, of my own free will, to explain. Katinka told me how ill you were, and I could not bear to think you should die believing me to be dishonourable."

"Madame speaks hopefully of my dying. It would please her, perhaps?"

"No. What do you take me for? I never loved you as you wished to be loved; but if M. Aksakoff had not interfered, and we had married, I should have come to love you."

"You speak of what might have been."

"I suppose so. Circumstances are altered. Marriage is out of the question."

"Assuredly, and I am scarcely fit for a bridegroom."

"What is the matter with you?" asked Leah, anxiously.

Demetrius passed over the question. "Besides, Captain Strange informed me that your husband has returned. Madame was doubtless pleased at that marvellous resurrection, so cleverly managed."

"No," said Leah, honestly enough. "I was not; but circumstances made it imperative that Jim should return."

"And for me to travel in Siberia?"

"Blame M. Aksakoff, blame M. Aksakoff," she insisted. "I am innocent."

"Be pleased to observe, madame, that as yet I have brought no accusation against you."

"Katinka acted as your mouthpiece."

"You have not my authority to say that."

"Then I gather that you do not blame me for your exile?"

"How can I with any truth, madame, seeing that you accuse M. Aksakoff?"

"I do," said Leah, resolutely.

"In that case I regret that Mademoiselle struck the wrong person."

"You know that she struck me?"

"I was informed of it this morning, and express my regret that she acted so foolishly. Did the blow hurt you?"

"It was most painful. I feel it still."

"Your lip is cut, then?"

"Both lips--inside, luckily, so there will be no visible scars. But even now a very little would make them bleed."

Such was the profound egotism of her nature that she expected further sympathy from the man she had reduced to such a condition. But the doctor's stock of polite phrases appeared to be exhausted. In place of a compliment came a hoarse chuckle, like the cry of an early starling. "You appear to approve," said Leah, ironically.

"Pardon; I mentioned before that Mademoiselle, in my humble opinion, was wrong."

"She was very wrong. I am not accustomed to deal with wild beasts."

"Spare me, madame; I owe her so much."

"I owe her nothing except revenge for striking me. But I excuse that because she is ignorant of the truth."

"I am also ignorant, madame."

"You shall hear it now--yes, the absolute truth."

Again came the raucous sound, which might have been a laugh or a groan--Leah could not tell which.

"The truth," murmured the sick man; adding, after a significant pause, "I am waiting, madame."

"I went to Paris with Miss Tallentire," explained the Duchess, beginning anywhere in her hurry, "and Mr. Askew followed."

"Followed you?"

"Certainly not. I always detested the boy--so conceited. He admired Miss Tallentire, and his liking for me was the passing fancy of a shallow nature. To arouse your jealousy, M. Aksakoff put it about that Mr. Askew intended to marry me in Paris. The gossip--and it was merely gossip--came to Mrs. Penworthy's ears. That woman hated me then, and hates me now. To make mischief she told you. You came over to Paris. There, you remember what took place."

"Not at our final meeting. My last memory of your face is seeing it across the tea-table."

"You had a fit of some kind, and M. Aksakoff called up a Dr. Helfmann, who took you away in a cab to be cured. Then I received a letter from you, stating that you were going to Russia. As I fancied you might have settled with M. Aksakoff about your pardon, of course I quite believed it, and--and--I think that is all."

"Did you not know that the letter was forged?"

"No!"

"That the so-called Dr. Helfmann was a spy?"

"No!"

"That the coffee--or rather, that the tea was drugged?"

"No. How could I possibly know that M. Aksakoff was using me as his tool? If the tea--it *was* tea--well, if he put anything into the tea, I did not see him do it. It was M. Aksakoff who gave you into Dr. Helfmann's charge, when you were insensible. Now, am I to blame?"

"Your explanation is eminently satisfactory, madame."

"And you believe me?"

"It would be impolite to doubt a lady."

Leah was nonplussed. She was manufacturing conversation, and his comments were trivial, if not ironical, as she shrewdly suspected. She could not quite arrive at his real meaning. He avoided answering leading questions, and would neither accept nor decline her asseverations.

"I have no more to say," she remarked, with an air of one washing her hands of the whole affair.

Again a deadly silence ensued; again she heard the heavy breathing of the creature hidden under the heaped blankets; again sounded the drowsy lapping of the water and the faint sigh of the wind. This time she resolved to make him speak, so that she might learn precisely what he thought. But the moments passed and no speech came. Finally it did come, in the unemotional voice of one

who speaks in his sleep. He discoursed on a subject about which she had no desire to hear.

"Paris--Havre--Kronstadt!" said the slow, drawling, monotonous tone, "and then the weary journey across the Urals. Oh, the cold and the snows and the bitter storms of Siberia! Chains and hunger, dirt and rags; and always--always--the hopeless future. None loved me; none lifted me up; none spoke words of kindness. Loneliness and sorrow and the constant torment of painful memories."

The voice died away in a sob. Leah, desperately anxious to defend herself still further, would have spoken. But her mouth was dry; her lips ached; tremors thrilled her body as the nerves twittered, jumped, and quivered. Over the low bunk she could see the rocking stars as the vessel swung to her anchor. What glimmer of light there was revealed faintly the piled blankets, and nothing more. The face was veiled by almost material shadows. And again, drearily and heavily, rose the thick, muddy voice, without variance in its tones, without the music of feeling. It might have been, and probably was, a voice from the tomb, as it surged sluggishly through the fetid gloom.

"St. Petersburg," announced the toneless voice, "Moscow, and the farce of a trial. The waving of a white-gloved hand, and a courtly bow, to dismiss me into pain and darkness and to a living grave. Nijni-Novgorod, and Mother Volga, who takes us convicts to her breast."

Here came the dry chanting of a weird song which made the listener's flesh creep, and her guilty soul quail. Then again, slowly, wearily, Demetrius began to name the stations of his cross on the way to the calvary of a final prison. "Kazan, Panybor, Perm, the bleak Urals, that prison wall of the exile; Ekaterinburg, Tiumen, the doorstep to the barren cell. Borka, Dobrouna, Oshalka"--the rough Russian names grated on Leah's ears;--"Yevlevoi and the slow-flowing river, the prison barge, the black bread, the bitter, biting, burning cold; Tobolsk, with its deathly mists and clammy darkness of Egypt; the Charity Song--the weary, weary Miloserdnaya!" He sang another line or two in a cracked voice, and broke out more humanly: "Then the warm sunshine like the smile of the good God, and days of those gentle winds we shall never breathe more. The flowers and the winds, the sunshine and the laughing children. Samarof, Sourgout, Narym;" he paused to gather strength for the crying of a name which issued with a sob of heartfelt agony: "Tomsk--oh, Tomsk! Those long, long days of waiting for what was to be; the horrible mercies of the unjust. Kyrie eleison! Christe eleison!

Kyrie eleison!" She saw the convulsive movements of the blankets, and knew that he was making the sign of the cross. After the crying to God and His Son came the protest against the cruelty of man. "The weary prison of Tomsk; the road--the long, horrible road to the ice-bound coast. Sakhalin, the island of pain, the hell of the innocent, and a human soul lost. Christe eleison! A loving, sinning soul for which Thou didst die, lost--lost--lost!"

Leah's nerves ached and shook and shuddered as the account of the vile journey welled forth smoothly like thick oil. With fixed eyes and fascinated ears she took in the terrible Odyssey. After another sobbing pause--the broken creature was crying bitterly--the voice recommenced, droning on one note until Leah felt that she could have screamed if only to vary the sound.

Demetrius spoke of the barren wastes of Sakhalin in the Gulf of Ochotsk, where the freezing straits of Neviski run between mainland and island. He told of obdurate Cossacks, of cruel gaolers, of the treacherous Gilyak natives, who prevent the escape of the mortal damned. A note of emotion crept into the voice, and in its level tones she discerned a faint hope. A smuggled letter, and the assurance that help was at hand; a corrupted warder, a bribed soldier, a black starless night, and a desperate escape over deserts of snow. Then came heart-rending relations of a drifting boat, of suffering and starvation and cold which burnt to the bone. Leah heard of a brave woman--"my love--my love," said the voice tenderly--toiling with a bought Japanese fisherman to bring the tiny shallop to a haven beyond the grip of the merciless Muscovite. The weird tale took her through La Perouse Straits, northward amongst the Kurile Islands, and into the naked lands of Kamchatka. Here again, as she gathered, the fugitives were in danger of recapture; but they fled still further north through the bitter cold, and under a bleak sunless sky, to herd with the Koriaks. The tormented voice droned ever on about these filthy savages, fish-eaters, and hunters of the unclean; it shuddered through accounts of loathsome diseases, and of smoky defiled huts like the hells of Swedenborg. And the man wailed always, ever and again, of the danger of being retaken, of terrible suspense, of shattered nerves, and of the eternal strength of a pure woman's love. The tale ended with painful outbursts of joy at the sight of Strange's tramp standing towards the inhospitable Siberian coast.

"Peace, plenty, warmth, food, safety, kindness, hope, love!" chanted the voice, broken up into almost musical gratitude. Then a pause of infinite meaning, ended by a dry clucking chuckle. "And I lived that I might see you," breathed the man

she had cast into the hell he had described. Leah's hair bristled at the roots. The speech was so terribly significant. But her soul still fought against the inevitable punishment, whatever that might be.

"Not my fault," she panted eagerly; "horrible, horrible--but not my fault! Oh, believe--believe me, Constantine."

"You have asserted your innocence before," murmured the sick man, ironically; "and now----"

"Now?" her heart almost stood still, so intensely did she listen.

"We must part for ever."

"But you--you----"

"I devote what remains of my life to the woman who has saved me--to the angel who drew me out of the frozen deeps of hell."

"And--and you--you will say--nothing?"

"This boat leaves here to-night for a place which need not be mentioned. I go out of your life for ever, and silent."

"Oh, thank you--thank you!"

"For what, madame, since you assure me of your innocence?"

Leah felt awkward. She had said too much. "Katinka is so prejudiced that I thought--I thought----"

Her voice died away. The lie would not come forth in the presence of this dying wretch.

"You thought she would be jealous. Ah, no, madame." Demetrius paused and clucked again like a brooding hen. "She permits you to kiss me with a last kiss."

"No!" Leah half rose, and fell again, recoiling with a cry of terror at the prospect of setting the final seal on her treachery, as did Judas in the Garden.

"I beg of you, my first love. One kiss to dismiss me into the silence--to close my mouth for ever and ever."

So he did doubt her; he did not believe. All her lies were discounted; all his conversation was merely ironical and make-believe. He held her in a vice, and release would come only when she submitted to a revolting caress.

"I will not--I dare not," she stammered, shrinking against the wall in an agony of physical fear from an object which a guilty imagination revealed as loathsome to sight and touch; "you--you have no right to----"

"The right of love," said the weary voice.

"You have no proof."

"The cypher letters;" and a lean hand held out a packet, drawn from under the discoloured blankets.

"For one kiss, madame--for one kiss."

"Ugh!" groaned Leah, and snatched eagerly.

Packet and hand disappeared swiftly, and the voice whistled in a jeering manner. "One kiss, madame, one kiss."

She still fought. "My mouth is sore. I am----"

"One kiss--one kiss--the last and the best; or--or----"

Leah, writhing against the wall, gasped soundlessly. In that last word there was the sound of a terrible threat. It was the knell of respectability, of ease and luxury, and of all that makes life worth living. A single caress would buy the evidence; a touch of her mouth, and she would be free for ever and ever and ever.

"One kiss, then," she muttered; and with all her soul crying strenuously against the horror, she tottered forward. "One;" her lips sought the place where a mouth might be supposed to be waiting. Two arms flew up and gripped her.

She could not scream, for the arms dragged her down, belted her like iron bands. Her mouth was on his, his lips were on hers. She writhed, silent and agonised, in the horrible caress, in the abominable embrace, trying to free herself in vain. Demetrius placed his lean hand on the back of her head and absolutely ground her mouth against his own. She could feel the wounds break and bleed, sanctifying the kiss of Judas.

His arms relaxed, she flung backward, and the long-withheld scream broke forth shrill and vehement. As if in answer to that terrible summons, Katinka tore open the door and entered with a smoky paraffin lamp. With one hand the girl thrust the shaking, sobbing woman forward, with the other held the lamp towards the face peering out of the blankets.

"Oh, my God!" shrieked Leah, and sprang from the cabin, pursued by the cackling of broken laughter.

She made for the deck--for the side--for anywhere, to be out of the sight of that face; that face which would haunt her till she died. Strange, in silence, handed her, sobbing and whimpering, down the black side, where the boat received her. She dropped in a heap, and beside her dropped from Katinka's hand a packet of letters. Above from an open port-hole came clucking, cackling, chuckling laughter, insanely gleeful, and the silent stars of God shone over land and sea.

CHAPTER XXXIII

So Leah won after all. She went out with a definite purpose, and returned with that purpose achieved; yet not fully, since what she desired had been flung to her as a bone to a dog. In the panic-stricken flight from the field she carried with her the spoils of victory and something less desirable. The price of her good name, the security of her position, the entire triumph--these, as she well knew, had been

gained by shameful self-surrender. Indeed, it could scarcely be called a victory, seeing that she had succumbed to the masterful brutality of her enemy. Nevertheless--and she derived comfort from the thought--it could not be termed a defeat. Her social glory yet flamed unextinguished; her character could not be smirched, and she could yet hold up her head to flout the found-out of her sex. But something bitter spoiled the flavour of these sweets. She had lost her belief in the fetish; its spell of good luck was broken; her nerve was gone, and with it self-respect. All she desired was to hide herself amongst familiar surroundings, that their very familiarity might fence in her quailing soul from impossible danger. And that the danger could be so described by her intellect revealed a demoralised will.

The cypher letters attesting her share in the conspiracy she destroyed by fire. They were genuinely those she had written, and the number was correct, so, when their ashes floated up the chimney, Leah drew the long, deep, relieved breath of one whose chains have been struck off. Yet, even at the moment of release, she shuddered to the core of her being. The ghost of a futile crime was laid, but the ghost might return. Demetrius had truly parted with all tangible evidence, and his unsubstantiated story would be whiffed away as too romantic for belief. Moreover, M. Aksakoff, for the sake of his own good name, and that of his Government, would swear to her innocence of this gross intrigue. She was safe--absolutely, entirely, and wholly safe. The world would never know how she had capered on the verge of an abyss, or how nearly she had missed her footing. But something--her conscience probably--told her that an unseen Judge was summing up her delinquencies; that she was being weighed in the balance and would be found wanting, even though her kingdom did not pass from her. This Judge, impartial, terribly quiet, severely righteous, might have been God; and He was God, although she refused recognition. Her tormented soul inspired her with the dread of an all-seeing and condemning eye; but she resolutely declined to admit the Maker, the Judge, or the Unseen in any way. Shadows should not frighten her, for these were not of the eating, drinking, merry-making world. All the same, shadows, elusive and unexpected, did strike terror to her guilty heart, and she reluctantly knew herself to be a broken woman. In those earlier hours of safety this knowledge was very insistent.

The week of her retirement passed pleasantly enough. She doctored her bruised lips, mended their torn skin, and argued occasionally with her shameful soul. The quiet life of silent hours in the midst of civilised balms partially restored her courage, but not as entirely as she could wish. Piecing her broken nerves

together as best she could, she strove to remount the pinnacle of supreme and self-sufficient egotism whence she had fallen. But Humpty-Dumpty could not be set up again, try as she might to replace him. During those brooding hours Leah recovered much, but not all. The week's end found her cured of the skin-deep blow, and outwardly the same insolent, radiant beauty of an adoring world. But she knew herself to be a changed being; the pantheress had become a hare, although less innocent. The sword of her tongue was still sharp, but the shield of self-righteousness was broken, and a keen-eyed antagonist sufficiently assertive could have reduced her to the same moral pulp that the interview with Demetrius had left her. Woe to the vanquished indeed! What remained but that she should receive the wooden foil of retirement from Destiny and leave the arena for ever. Her soul protested against this tame submission, so with indomitable courage she braced herself to further battle. With the world, that is, not with Demetrius. His abominable kiss had sapped her forces. She could face social enemies, she could defy the Eternal, she could encounter the fiends of hell, but not the man who had flung her into the dust--who had trailed her, and was still trailing her, at his chariot wheels. Certainly he had steamed into the unknown, and she would never behold him more. But his black influence remained and made itself felt at untoward moments.

Jim paid his promised visit almost at the end of her seclusion, and was disposed to be disagreeable on the plea that his wife had lied unnecessarily. Being truthful himself, when there was nothing to be gained by swerving from the path of rectitude, Jim abhorred a wasted fib, and proceeded to condemn Leah for shooting an aimless arrow from her mental quiver. It was the most pensive hour of the summer twilight when Jim began his sermon, and he preached in his wife's sitting-room. Darby sat beside Joan, who lay languidly on a sofa. What a perfect and touching picture of connubial felicity! If only a reporter of backstair gossip had been present to describe this middle-class domesticity of these great leaders of fashion, Brixton might have learned an edifying lesson from Belgravia.

"Now I do call it hard on a fellow," complained the Duke--"jolly hard--that you can't talk straight, Leah."

"If I did you would scarcely feel flattered. What is it now?"

"Aksakoff! Says he was never near Southend. Swore till all was blue that he'd never set eyes on that girl for months an' months."

"A sad deprivation for so affectionate a father."

"Well, then, he wants to know where she is."

"How should I know?" replied the Duchess, indifferently. "She chose to remain at Southend, and I returned here alone."

"What were you doin' at Southend?"

"That is my business, Jim!"

"Mine also. You said something that wasn't true."

"Really? The Accuser of the Brethren in the pulpit with a vengeance!"

The Duke stared. "I don't know what you mean."

"I am quite sure you don't. Stop talking, please. I am too ill to be worried."

"Rats," said Jim, elegantly; "you look like a picture.*"

"Then permit me the privilege of one, and do not ask for replies."

The Duke strolled to the window in a huff, and surveyed his property with sulky looks. Leah sat up on her sofa and pondered as to how much she should say and how much leave unsaid. Jim had always been under the impression that Demetrius had done his dirty work for money, and the truth would not probably strike him as amusing. Leah could easily have conceived and told a pretty fairy tale, as she was always resourceful in the way of fiction; but the sight of his pink, fatuous face filled her with rage. Why should he be a beast with women, and she a vestal with men? Was not sauce for the gander sauce for the goose also? She determined to tell him the whole brutal affair, with certain reservations concerning the betrayal of Demetrius. Jim had few moral scruples, but what he had would be averse to the betrayal of an accomplice, however dangerous. Yes; she would tell him enough to annoy him, and shake him out of his aggravating complacency. Also she wanted some one in whom to confide. But how to bring up the subject again without pandering to her husband's desire to be master?

He gave her the chance immediately. Like a bulldog, Jim never let go of anything he had once gripped. Into his thick head had crept some idea of a

mystery, connected with Southend and with his wife's visit thereto. Therefore he stared out of the window until he thought she was more amenable to reason, and then came back to his seat with the old question.

"Why did you go to Southend?" he asked, doggedly.

Leah, not yet ready, fenced. "I told you why I went."

"No, you didn't. Aksakoff says----"

"Of course he does. Did you ever know a diplomatist who told the truth?"

"Huh! That comes well from you, considering."

"I never knew that white lies were political privileges. Besides, Aksakoff is too ashamed of Katinka to tell the truth."

"What's she been doin'?" asked the Duke, alertly. He had the soul of a knitter in the sun for gossip.

"Rescuing Demetrius," answered Leah, curtly.

"What!!!" Jim turned white and purple and red and green like a rainbow, and spluttered at the mouth. His wife, eyeing him coldly, did not think this exhibition of genuine fear a pretty sight. "He'll--why, he'll--tell," gasped Jim, gulping down an extremely serviceable word, which better fitted his feelings than surroundings.

"Of course."

"It's a question of money, I suppose."

"No, it isn't."

"But you told me----"

"What I chose to tell you. I always do."

Was there ever such a trying woman? Jim gulped down another out-of-place oath, and strode noisily up and down the room. He halted at intervals to tell his wife precisely what he thought of her. As the room was isolated, and there was

no danger of eavesdropping servants, he indulged in a raised voice and a flow of language which revealed his very limited vocabulary. Leah, with her chin on her knuckles and a round elbow on the sofa cushion, listened unmoved, and looked as though she were having her photograph taken. Jim might have been executing his dance before a graven image for all the emotion she showed.

"I've had enough of this," shouted his Grace, maddened by a disdainful silence. "Just you explain, or I'll--why, hang it, I'll forget that I am a gentleman."

"It seems to me that you have forgotten."

"Oh! You would drive a saint mad."

"Lionel is perfectly sane, and he is the sole saint I have met."

"Ain't you afraid of my striking you?" demanded Jim's bulldog nature.

"Horribly afraid. Can't you see how I tremble?"

Poor Jim. He was quite at the end of his resources. Mrs. Penworthy always quailed, when he was in his tantrums; Lady Sandal fought fairly and squarely, slang for slang: but this calm, smiling she-fiend only sat like a dummy, waiting for him to do what she very well knew he would never dare to do.

"I wonder if you're a woman," groaned the Duke, returning beaten and baffled and completely exhausted to his chair.

"I wonder, too, seeing what you have made me put up with."

"Come, now, I've always treated you well."

"And other women better."

"What other women?" growled Jim, on his guard.

"You know very well."

"I don't. I know nothin', not even why you're bullyraggin' me. I swear," cried Jim, pathetically, to the ceiling, "that it's uncommonly hard for a cheery chap like me to be tied to a woman who--who--who----" Here words failed him, and he

gasped.

"Go on. I admire your descriptions of my personality. They are so extraordinarily vivid and true."

"Who ain't what she ought to be."

Leah's opportunity to break the ice had come, and locking her hands together, she gazed pensively at the Duke, who wriggled uneasily on his seat. "How did you guess, Jim?"

"Guess what?" demanded the tormented man.

"That I am not what I ought to be."

The Duke stared aghast. "Then you ain't t" he shouted.

"Dr. Demetrius might say so."

"Leah!" He sprang up with clenched fists and his face took on a direfully black expression, which rejoiced her heart.

"Jim, I believe--really, I believe that you have some love for me after all."

"Oh, hang your fine talk. Demetrius?"

"I have kissed him."

"He dared to kiss you?"

"I dared to kiss him."

"You devil!" He suddenly raised his fist. Leah never winced, although he towered over her with his mouth working and his eyes animal in their unconsidering passion. It was impossible to strike, although his heart cried out that she ought to die. With an oath--it came out savagely this time--the fist dropped. "I'll have a divorce," muttered Jim, and plunged for the door.

"Because I kissed a man. Nonsense."

"Kissin' doesn't stop at kissin'."

"Not with you, perhaps."

"Leah!" he turned and reclosed the door, which his rage had wrenched open. "I know you've got a beastly tongue, and all that; but I could have sworn that you were as pure as my mother."

"Well, and so you can."

"What? After you confessin' that you kissed Demetrius?"

"Ugh!" Leah shuddered, as a picture after the style of Wiertz rose to her mind's eye. "I kissed a thing which was once Demetrius."

"Is he dead, then?"

"Better if he were. Ugh! That kiss was the most horrible thing I ever had to do in my life."

"Why did you do it, then?"

"I was forced to," she said faintly, and nausea made her place a handkerchief suddenly to her lips.

The Duke returned for the third time to his seat and looked into her changing face with round inquiring eyes. "There's somethin' in this I don't catch on to," he muttered; then, with gruff tenderness, and a timid caress from which Leah did not shrink, "What is it, old girl?"

The Duchess laughed. It was amusing to find her husband playing the spring bachelor. "I believe you love me," said she, recovering her colour.

"You know I do, only you keep me at arm's length."

"Have I not cause?"

"You wouldn't have, if you behaved as a fellow's wife should," said the Duke, bluntly. "Drop skirtin' round the bush and plunge in."

Leah admired and respected him in this peremptory mood, and for once showed no disposition to use her sharp tongue. Instinct told her that she had at length

reached the end of Jim's tether, and that her easy-going bulldog was inclined to curl his lips. Therefore did she relate picturesquely and half-truthfully all her doings since the beginning of things in the gallery. For the time being her story broke off with the return of his Grace.

Jim listened with praiseworthy self-control. He certainly growled and scowled at the relation of that early loss, which had bound Demetrius to the service of the woman who betrayed him; but her artless confession robbed the butterfly caress of half its iniquity. Sometimes he grunted admiration of her pluck during the perils of his absence, and grinned when she detailed the melodramatic interview with Strange. Most of the time his eyes searched her face to make certain that she was telling the truth. He believed she was, although she kept back the precise way in which Demetrius had departed for Siberia. But she laid enough of this particular blame on Aksakoff's back to make Jim swear.

"The mean, dirty, foreign hound," cursed Jim, between his teeth. "I don't pretend to be an angel, but if I'd dropped to that----" he shook his fist with a scarlet face. "An' to think Aksakoff should dare to make use of your room--the rotten cur. I'll tell him what I think."

"Better not, Jim. Let sleeping dogs lie."

"Sleepin' mongrels," muttered the Duke. "All right; but don't you ever speak to him again. Do you hear?"

He blared out the order in a regimental manner, and Leah nodded.

"Yes, dear," she said meekly, "we must draw the line somewhere."

Jim nodded and gloomed, and rumbled something about Aksakoff that certainly was not a benediction. Then he harked back to his leading question, which had not yet been answered. "Why did you go to Southend?"

"Katinka, who had rescued Demetrius from Sakhalin Island, made me go to see him. I had to obey, else there might have been trouble. The man was ill on board Strange's steamer."

"Strange? Thought we paid the cad."

"We did." Leah frowned at the recollection of the sum. "But he had some liking for Demetrius, and helped him to escape, worse luck."

"Come now, don't say that. Siberia----" Jim shuddered. "Beastly place, Siberia."

"Nonsense. The climate is quite decent if you make up your mind. I don't believe those convict creatures suffer so much as they say."

She told the lie without sign of emotion, but all the same felt an inward qualm at the memory of the doctor's terrible narrative.

The Duke chewed his moustache meditatively. "An' you saw Demetrius?"

"Ugh!" Leah covered her face and rocked. "To live with that in my thoughts, and to think that I kissed It."

"Why did you?" demanded Jim, furiously.

"To get the cypher letters connected with the insurance plot," she replied, looking up; then detailed with necessary suppressions the greater and least repulsive part of her nauseous visit to the tramp steamer. The story sounded by no means pretty, and all her courage was necessary to enable her to arrive at finis.

When she did the Duke sprang up in a pelting rage. "My wife to be treated like that!"

"Oh, the treatment was not so bad," lied the Duchess, easily. "Of course, my mouth was sore with the fall on the stairs, but I managed to touch the lips of that--that---- Ugh! ugh!"

"I'll go to Southend to-morrow," announced the Duke, frowning. "I can't thrash Demetrius, poor devil, but I'll hammer the life out of that second-hand skipper."

"You won't find the boat there, Jim. I made inquiries, and learnt that it left, as Demetrius said it would, shortly after my visit. And we are quite safe. That kiss--"

"Leave the kissin' alone," cried Jim, turning on her fiercely. "Of course, I see you couldn't quite help it; but----"

"No 'but' at all," contradicted Leah, sharply. "If I hadn't bought back those cypher letters in that way the whole story might have come out. And then, Jim--well, you know."

"I do--I do." Jim groaned and dropped on the sofa beside her. "Oh, what fools we were to go into that insurance business!"

"It was my fault, dear. Don't worry. Demetrius will die soon, and Strange has his blackmail. We are entirely safe."

"Katinka?"

"Oh," said the Duchess, with a flippancy she was far from feeling, "I suppose she'll sit by the grave of that man for the rest of her days."

"You're sure he's dyin'?"

"Yes!" She turned pale, and her voice quavered. "Such an object could not possibly live. It would be a--a--sin."

"What's his trouble?"

"I don't know--I can't say. I don't want to say. It's--it's too beastly for words. Ugh! He looked--looked--oh!" Leah's mouth worked like a rebuked child, and she burst into tears--into real womanly tears of shame and terror and outraged modesty. "That horrible kiss--oh, that horrible kiss!" she wailed, pinching his shoulder in her hysterical emotion.

"Poor old girl," said Jim, softly, and put his arm round her.

For once she appreciated marital sympathy, and learned that woman was not made to live alone. Leaning her cheek thankfully against the rough tweed of his coat, she sobbed vehemently, a frightened and crushed creature. Jim felt that he was a married man after all, and administered gruff consolation. It worried him to see this high-spirited woman break down so utterly. "There, there," said he, tenderly; "it's all right, old girl. You've got me."

"Thank God," murmured the beaten atheist.

Jim thought she must be going out of her mind. "What's that?" That she should thank a God she did not believe in, and for a husband whom hitherto she had always scorned, quite frightened him.

"What's that, Leah?" he asked again.

"Thank God for you," sobbed the Duchess, brokenly.

"Oh, my aunt," muttered the startled husband; then proceeded to fresh consolation: "Well, then, I'll break the head of any bounder who dares to say a word against you."

"Yes; but I'm afraid we're wicked, Jim."

"Other people are as bad," said the Duke, stoutly, "though I don't suppose we'd get a Sunday School prize. 'Course it ain't much good racin' in blinkers. We're a bad lot, the pair of us. I've behaved like a rotter, and worse, while you're like something I can't think of. Seems to me, Leah, we've been runnin' awfly crooked. Let's make a fresh start from scratch, and go straight for the future. Tandem, y' know," suggested Jim; "I'll be wheeler, as usual."

"We must make the best of things, I suppose," whimpered Leah, drying her eyes, and still too much unstrung to realise her regeneration.

"That's about it. We'll give sin a rest for a bit. I'll chuck that woman, and be your husband. I swear, Leah, I'll be a Methodist parson sort of husband."

"No, don't," said the Duchess, alarmed. "It's a mistake to overdo things."

Jim laughed, and she laughed.

"Well, I don't suppose I could keep on that game for long," said her husband; "but I mean that I'll be awfly square, an' footle after you round the town. It's th' sort of thing good husbands do, y' know. Give us a kiss, old girl, an' we'll begin our married life all over again."

Leah obeyed very contentedly, and nestled in Jim's strong arms like an innocent schoolgirl. She felt worn-out and tired, and drowsy from excess of emotion; felt also that here was a much-desired haven for a worried woman. "Dear old Jim!" she sighed, and Jim kissed her again.

The light was dying out of the sunset sky, and the room filled with pale warm shadows. The reconciled pair sat silently on the sofa in the gathering darkness, locked in a close embrace. The remorseful Jim felt that they were prisoners in the same dock, and anxiously paved a certain place with the very best intentions. Leah went to sleep, thanks to a less tender conscience.

To the world these two were the prosperous and happy Duke and Duchess of Pentland; to themselves, a misguided couple driven to do wrong by circumstances; but to God--what did they appear in God's sight? Remorse is not repentance, and remorse was the sole feeling of which they were capable. Leah's sleep was the slumber of the worn-out; Jim's self-promised reformation the result of shame. Shallow beings, miserable creatures, they could not plumb the depth of their wrong-doing. To them, sins were faults, and they were governed less by the Sermon on the Mount than by the laws of society. Indeed, it is questionable if either one of them was aware that such a sermon had been preached; but both knew to a hair how far they could go without being ostracised.

Jim was the better of the two, for the cold, brutal story told by his wife made him hot with the public-school shame of having done things which no fellow could do. The drastic codes of Eton and Harrow and Rugby and Winchester came to his mind, and he saw how he had sinned against the primitive laws of honour. Without oaths, he swore to lead a better and cleaner life with Leah to help him. He would be charitable and a good landlord, and take the chair at public dinners, and speak in the Lords, and chuck Lady Sandal--who was too expensive--and drop gambling to a certain extent, and not swear more than necessary, and--and--do what a man in his high position ought to do.

It will thus be seen that poor Jim's ideas of reformation were crude. He felt this himself, poor man, in his narrow brain; and like the child he really was, looked down to ask his clever wife's advice. He had no time to consider the irony of the thing, even if it had occurred to him, for discovering that Leah was sound asleep, he wondered hugely. From the placid expression of her face it was very plain that her crimes had not followed her into Dreamland. Jim whistled softly, marvelling that she could slumber so immediately after what she had told him. Laying her gently back on the sofa, he summoned her maid, and went about his own business. This was to begin reformation without loss of time.

"I must help Leah to be good," said the new broom.

But first he had to reform himself, and set about the first step, or what he conceived to be the first step, with the enthusiasm of the very bad person made uncomfortable by remorse. The vicar of Firmingham received a visit from his patron just as he was about to enjoy a well-earned dinner.

"Lionel," said the Duke, nervously, "I'm comin' to communion in a month. Could you get me whitewashed in that time?"

Lionel stared, and looked upward. Strange to say the heavens did not fall.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Were a purblind generation convinced of the invaluable blessings of sorrow, trouble would be robbed of its sting. Ignorance and fear make the unenlightened bemoan their burdens, or shirk bearing them, as they should be borne, with the strength of hope. Chastening is the gift of the eternal love, and those happy few who know this submit with joy to the improving rod. But worrying is not submission, nor is grumbling a recognition of curative effects. To be manful, to be daring, to be so entirely wise from the learning of the lesson as to extract the sweet from the bitter, thus do we prove ourselves worthy of that suffering which God bestows in mercy and in pity. Troubles, if rightly understood, deepen the most shallow character, purify the most soiled soul. They begin in woe but they end in joy. When the lesson is learned, then comes the holiday--or more precisely, the holy-day--of peace and gladness.

Jim, in his simple way, understood that out of apparent evil great good had come to himself and Leah. Never before had they understood each other so well; never before had they forgathered with less friction. The Duke's reformation was as genuine as his embryonic soul was capable of making it. He felt desperately ashamed of himself at the communion table, and shame of self, provided the

physical ego be not considered, is the beginning of repentance, which leads to hope, which brings pardon and solace to the uneasy, sinful heart. Jim did not become a saint by any manner of means, but he tried by fits and starts to be a better man, and so, with true though faltering zeal, advanced towards the light. And it was much gained that so once self-satisfied a man should acknowledge himself to be at all in need of improvement. The recalled code of schoolboy honour helped him to amend the less drastic rules of the society man. Could Jim have only gone still farther back, and remembered helpful nursery prayers and childish faith, he might have seen even more clearly how to utilise his mistakes. But he was yet a spirit in embryo, and his receptive powers were not great.

Leah did not keep pace with her husband on the upward path. When the danger was brought to naught, and her nerves became more normal, she forgot everything with the alacrity of a hardened heart. The wind of the Spirit had but troubled the surface of her nature; its depths remained undisturbed. Within a fortnight her dear devil of egotism returned, and she tore out of her book of life the disagreeable page, which she declined to read for the second time. Certainly she retained so much grace and memory as not to laugh at Jim's efforts to be good, and she was less ready than of yore to see and comment upon his obvious failings. But she secretly wondered that he should try to be pious, when there was no worldly advantage to be gained by such dullness. Besides, Jim, with the zeal of the newly converted, began to preach in a stammering, shamefaced way about the duties they owed to themselves in particular and to society at large. He even looked up *Noblesse oblige* at the tail-end of the dictionary, and quoted the platitude to Leah. On that occasion she had laughed consumedly; but, truth to say, Jim's sermons bored her immensely. She preferred those of Lionel, who, as a professional guide to glory, knew his business, whereas poor dear Jim was hopelessly muddled.

Therefore, while the Duke laboriously tried to be good, and succeeded but doubtfully, Leah was coquetting deliriously with the world, the flesh, and the many agreeable devils of her acquaintance. She improved her former extravagances into something worse, and revenged herself for being agreeable to Jim by letting both friends and enemies have the full benefit of her witty, cruel tongue. The few who did not come under its lash were in ecstasies at her sparkling conversation, and the many who did made themselves pronouncedly pleasant out of mortal fear. Leah danced and sang through the season with the insolent glee of a woman who knows her position to be unassailable. Jim wondered at her short memory, and tried to refresh it; but that she would not

endure, and declined even to hear the name of Demetrius. Moreover, as M. Aksakoff had been translated to Copenhagen, there was no need to smooth matters over between him and the Duke. Everything was safe, everything was ripping, and she felt that her latest *pas de seul* was being executed on firm ground. She had skipped in the very nick of time from that dangerous old mount which had erupted so feebly.

And no one could say but what she did her best to be amiable. Late in the season she met and congratulated Mr. and Mrs. Askew; she told Lady Richardson how she admired her courage--underlined--in marrying that handsome pauper, Captain Lake; and forgivingly did she condole with Mrs. Penworthy, when the unexpected death of Freddy, from overwork, left that evergreen hack a widow whom no admirer wished to marry. Lady Canvey was most tenderly considered, and Wallace, the globe-trotting cynic, on Leah's introduction, amused the stay-at-home old lady by special command. The sedate Hengists thought even more of the Duchess than they had done of Lady Jim, and she was often asked to bore herself in their protective company. She gave Sir Billy Richardson a smiling time at one of the ducal seats, and invited Joan Kaimes to Curzon Street for a week of shopping and frivolity. Also bazaars and charity concerts, and meetings about the unemployed aristocracy, took up her attention. The fashionable congregation of an exclusive church beheld her regularly in its midst, and heard the audible admission that she was a miserable sinner--a most touching confession for a truly good Duchess to make. Then she befriended a bishop, who was not too straight-laced, and induced him to preach a scientific sermon in Lionel's church, of which Lionel, very nastily, did not approve. Oh, it was a merry time, when the grapes were ripe and the first-fruits of her ducal harvest were being gathered in. The Duchess of Pentland won golden opinions even from the censorious. Things could not have been better managed by the discarded fetish, and Leah admitted that in this respectable orgy the birthday of her life had come.

During this meteoric career it surprised every one that she should choose to retire suddenly. Fashion clamoured at her closed doors; society journals wondered and lamented; individual friends expressed themselves puzzled; and in print and conversation the freak of a Duchess who chose to disappear was freely discussed. It was as though the noonday sun should set unexpectedly. Leah's radiant orb had blazed triumphantly for a few months, paling the lesser stars of society, and then--had vanished. The Duke, when applied to for an explanation, stated that she had gone abroad, because her health was--hum--hum--hum. She crossed the Channel alone, too, which looked odd. People began to talk and to invent reasons to explain the inexplicable. But not even the most daring hinted at a connubial disagreement. Jim would have stopped any such rumour at once with high words. Not that it could arise, seeing that he thanked God publicly every Sunday for possessing a wife whose price was far above rubies. But whatever had happened, whatever might be the reason, it was indisputable that the beautiful and wealthy and clever and popular Duchess of Pentland had retired from the world in her heyday of social success.

Lionel was the first to hear of her when she returned unexpectedly to Firmingham, after a month's sojourn on the Continent. One day in the chilly grey autumn weather he received a note asking him to call at four o'clock, and went unthinkingly to pass through what he afterwards remembered as the most painful hour of his life. He fancied, when setting out, that Leah merely wished to see him about the Duke. It might be that Jim, with the Old Adam leaven still working within, had broken out again, and that Lionel was summoned to call the sinner a second time to repentance. But the Duke, as he gathered from old Colley, was vegetating at Hengist Castle. It was impossible that the Old Adam could emerge from his penitential cell in so respectable and moral a neighbourhood.

Leah received her cousin in the sitting-room of her Lady Jim days, where they had twice talked seriously. Later on it appeared that she had a special reason for selecting an apartment sanctified by the vicar's endeavour to improve her into a moderately presentable angel. It was a charming and tastefully decorated room, and the Duchess was as tastefully decorated and as charming as her surroundings. She sat in a deep chair by a brisk fire, dressed with that perfect choice of colour and material which always distinguished her. The delicate blue of her frock, and a selection of certain filigree silver ornaments, matched marvellously with her splendid red hair and sapphire eyes. Lionel noted an

unusual pallor, but thought that he had never seen, her look more lovely. Apparently she had been reading, for she dropped her handkerchief over an open book on the small table at her elbow when she rose to shake hands. He mechanically wondered at the trivial action, and learned its significance later.

"So very kind of you to come, Lionel," said the Duchess, pressing his hand cordially. "I know how busy you are with your parishioners."

"You are one of them," smiled the clergyman.

"At odd moments, certainly; but we globe-trot for our places of worship nowadays. Sit down;" she indicated a convenient chair opposite her own. "Now tell me the news of your small world. Is Joan quite well?"

"Could not be better, considering the circumstances."

"I am so glad; when do you expect the happy event?"

"In a month, please God."

Leah looked pensively into the fire. "I hope it will be a boy."

"I shall be more than content with a girl. Why a boy particularly?"

"Why not, when an heir is so important? You succeed Jim, and a new Marquis of Frith----"

"My dear Duchess, you and the Duke are young. There is little chance of my succeeding. I may be congratulating you some day."

"No," cried Leah, almost fiercely; "such a thing can never be, thank God."

Lionel stared. "Why 'thank God'?"

"Oh--er--I hardly know; of course, I should hate to be pestered with children. The nursery is an obsolete institution here, and will remain so, unless"--she hesitated--"unless Jim marries again."

"Duchess!"

"Why not Leah?"

"If it will please you. But why talk of Jim's marrying again, when you are in the best of health and spirits?"

She shrugged indifferently. "One never knows, I might go first."

"I sincerely trust not."

"Does that imply that you wish me to be a real widow, after posing as a sham one?"

"Of course not; but you talk so strangely."

"And so honestly. Remember, I have always paid you the compliment of being plain even to rudeness."

Lionel tried to read her face, but in vain, and could not arrive at the meaning of her apparently aimless conversation. The slanting rays of sunset made a radiant glory round her as she half sat, half reclined in the chair, and her beauty could bear even that merciless test. Youth, health, money, charm, loveliness--with these desirable blessings at her command, what else could she want?

"I do not quite understand," said the perplexed man.

"Understand what?" she asked absently; then became more alive to his question.

"Oh, my chatter. You will, before we part. I am no sphinx to propose riddles."

"Every woman is a sphinx."

"Without a secret; that is why you men find us so difficult to comprehend."

"I confess to the difficulty at this moment."

"What a complex mind I must have! Yet I am a very ordinary butterfly of fashion; something with wings, at all events, though not entirely an angel."

Her visitor laughed. "Am I to pay you a compliment, or rebuke you for frivolity?"

"You can do both or either; the sweet first will counterbalance the bitter last. But I sicken of compliments."

"Even when genuine?"

"They never are. Men say things they don't mean to women out of traditional reverence for the exploded idea of the weaker vessel. When you meet a child your first thought is to give it sweets; when you talk with us the same thought is translated into polite lies. And we never believe you--never," Leah assured him. "Plain or beautiful, vain or humble, we prize the words directly. In no case have I found them to be of value."

"You make us out to be fools."

"One must be truthful at times. Of course, I always except you, Lionel, as you are more man than parson."

"Cannot I be both?"

"Oh, yes, when miracles occur. Lately I heard of a parson who laboured solitary and freezing amongst the snows of Labrador for a poor eighty pounds a year. He was emphatically a man."

"And a parson," supplemented the vicar; "so, you see, miracles do occur."

A warm colour crept into Leah's cheeks, and she looked piercingly at her companion. "Do they? Nowadays, I mean. I am not using a mere phrase, believe me. Honestly now, could those Gospel miracles occur in this twentieth century?"

Lionel mused, and considered a careful reply. "Our Master was given the Spirit without measure as a man because He was the Son of the Most High; by that wisdom did He work His marvels. But the Apostles, in His power, also prevailed over the apparently natural, showing signs and wonders to the glory of the Risen Lord and His Father. 'With faith ye can do all things,' said the blessed Jesus Himself. Yes, Leah, I reverently believe that with purity, faith, and a humble trust in the Father by the merits of the Son, and by the power of the Holy Ghost, miracles could take place to-day."

"Then why don't they?" she asked abruptly.

The vicar, sighing, dropped into the high-pitched sing-song of the pulpit. "A faithless and perverse generation----"

"A scientific generation, you mean. I don't believe--I can't believe--and I won't believe. Prove the power of your Master. You have faith; you are good; you----"

"No, no! You go too fast. I assuredly try to be good, but I am sadly wanting in many ways. I have faith, but how weak, how faltering. Who am I, to claim that the Lord should select me to reveal His strength unto men? I can work no miracle, Leah. Would to God that I could, if only to convince you!"

"Would to God that you could!" she echoed with something like a groan, and the faint flush disappeared, like the dying out of a hope.

"Why do you, a sceptic, ask about these things?"

Leah, possessed by the spirit of the perverse, laughed maliciously. "Jim is trying to be good; why should not I try also, since a wife is bound to follow her husband, according to St. Paul, who by the way was a bachelor? But," her mood shifted, "Jim has a tin-pot sort of faith which is better than nothing. I have not, and so, like your unbelieving Jews, require a sign."

Lionel became professionally interested, descrying intimations of a changed heart. "I believe that you will yet find the Kingdom," he said hopefully.

"Don't you make any such mistake," she retorted. "I have not yet set out to find it, and never will, unless I see some of those wonders about which you talk so glibly."

"But, believe me----"

"I do, though not to the extent of Bible magic. You hypnotise yourself into crediting the impossible. I wish you could hypnotise me. Oh, I wish--I wish--I wish!" she ended passionately.

"Faith is not hypnotism," argued Lionel; the word grated on his ear.

"It is--it is--it is!" Leah was vehement in her denial. "Science can explain everything. Why do you come here to prate of miracles, when you know in your own heart that such things never were and never can be?"

"They were and they can be and they will be, while Christ reigneth," asserted the vicar, firmly; "nothing is impossible to God."

"Then call upon Him, and work your marvel."

"I am not worthy."

"You are not able, rather," and she taunted him as did Elijah the priests of Baal, their god.

Kaimes wondered at her restless moods, and wondered still more when she abruptly left the serious subject they were discussing--and on her own initiative--to talk most frivolously.

"I have heard you preach," went on this weathercock, "and I am no more to be persuaded than was Agrippa. You and your shadows"--she whiffed these away. "Pouf! Let us talk of real things;" and a toss of her head dismissed the spiritual for the purely temporal. "I had such a ripping time this season," rattled on the nature set upon pomps and vanities.

"Leah, Leah! How can you?"

"Change so rapidly? Oh, my good man, I am a twirl-ma-gee woman, ever seeking variety. Religious conversation is neither amusing nor convincing. It's much more fun to talk of one's friends and abuse their failings."

"I decline to join in," said Lionel, dryly, and feeling nonplussed.

"Because you have no sense of humour. What a dull time of it Joan must have, poor child!"

"She does not complain," he objected stiffly.

"Oh, Lord, what is the use of complaining! I never whimper about Jim, though his goodness is even duller than his badness. 'I have tried George drunk, I have tried George sober'"--she was quoting an epigram of Charles II.--"and there is nothing in George."

"You are unnecessarily personal," rebuked Kaimes, annoyed.

"That's right. Tramp on your little corns and you howl."

He intimated that he desired to leave. "My time is valuable."

"Oh, I know you are a millionaire of seconds and hours. How disagreeable you are, when I want to be amused!"

"You have just informed me that I am dull," he reminded her pointedly.

"So you are; all honest men are dull. Why, I don't know, unless it is that honesty and wit match as ill as beauty and brains. Now don't look at your watch again. I have something to tell you that will make your clerical hair stand on end."

What could one do with such a whirlwind woman? The vicar replaced his watch and shrugged resignedly. She was what she had always been, freakish and uncertain; but on this occasion more so than usual. An April lady, whimsical and irresponsible, decidedly rude, and aggravatingly amusing. But Kaimes instinctively felt that at the back of these volleying drifts of smalltalk lurked something serious, which she feared to handle. Hoping that in time it might be manifested to his intelligence, he waited patiently, while Leah scrambled on verbosely in her gabble of nothings.

"You need a London month to pull you together. Dull country, dull man; dull man, awful bore. Get a parish in the West End; you'll have howling larks converting Dives and Jezebel of the drawing-room."

"I do not look upon conversion as a lark."

"I do, especially with Jim. Oh, Lord, to think that he of all people should turn goody-goody. You are pleased, of course; the sight of the lost black sheep trotting home to fodder to the fold is----"

"I really cannot listen to this talk," said Lionel, rising quickly.

"Yes, you can. I'll shock you more before I've done."

Kaimes resumed his seat blankly. "But your reason?"

Leah jumped up as her visitor sat down, and addressed nothing in particular.

"He asks for reason, and from a woman," she exclaimed. "So like that lame Lord Esbrook; he always asks what he should not and what he is never likely to get."

"Reason from women?"

"And from men, who have still less to spare. But that's his way. Have you met Lord Esbrook? Such a funny walk as he has. Dot and carry one--wooden leg, you know; dot and carry one--just like this only much worse;" and Leah limped the length of the room, mimicking an extraordinary gait so cleverly that Lionel laughed openly.

"Though you shouldn't mock at people's infirmities," he coughed.

"Why not? Esbrook's a holy show, and with the spite of the cripple, he spares no one's feelings. He's the cracked black pot snarling at the kettles he can never hope to be, with his dot and carry one, dot and carry one;" and back she came swinging and grunting with provoking cleverness.

In her gyrations--it seemed from her imitations that Lord Esbrook gyrated--she overturned the table upon which rested the covered book. Leah pounced to pick up the volume, as did Kaimes, out of courtesy. When he had set the table on its legs he could scarcely refrain from glancing casually at the book. Its exterior was familiar.

"The Bible!" exclaimed an amazed man.

Leah flung herself into the chair, laughing noisily. "Oh, what a face!" she mocked, pointing a jeering finger. "Look at yourself, do."

"Were--you--reading the Bible?" asked the vicar, too astonished to note the poor attempt she made to force humour.

"Why not?" said she, defiantly, but with flushes and quick breaths.

"You only mock."

"The opportunity is so alluring," was her reply. "There's such an awful lot of rot in that history of the Jews. And hundreds of impossibilities. Here!" She seized the Bible and rapidly swept the pages. "What was I reading when you entered?" The thin leaves flew and flickered beneath her fingers. "Oh yes! Something quite too absurd in Matthew."

"St. Matthew."

"Mister St. Matthew, if you will. There;" she presented the book; "you read so beautifully--really you do, without flattery."

"I will not read for you to mock."

Her face flashed into crude anger. "Read," she commanded harshly.

The vicar would have declined again, but that his eye fell on the verses she had indicated. A memory of their earlier conversation, coupled with her unnecessary vehemence, made him obey without further hesitation. It might be that here was the key to the problem of her jerky speech. His mellow voice rose like the music of a solemn bell, and the glorious words rolled majestically through the room.

"When He was come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped Him, saying, Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean. And Jesus put forth His hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed."

"And immediately his leprosy was cleansed," breathed the Duchess, gripping the arms of her chair to lean forward. "Why not 'her' leprosy?"

Lionel laid down the sacred volume. "It was a man who came to ask mercy of our Lord," said he, obtusely.

Leah threw herself back in the chair with the pettish cry of a misunderstood child. "Oh, you fool!"

Something in her voice startled him; yet he was far from gathering her meaning. "What is it?" he demanded, entirely bewildered.

There was no light in her eyes now; from luminous sapphires they had become pebbles, dull orbs of lapis-lazuli. When she spoke her voice creaked and wheezed "If your Master lived to-day, I would go to Palestine!" she said, looking very directly at him.

"What on earth for?" he asked blankly.

"Can you not understand?"

Her look was that of Medusa, and flickering lights came and went in her half-lifeless eyes. Their glare, rather than the toneless notes of her voice, made him faintly understand. The chosen passage out of St. Matthew, taken in conjunction with her earlier chatter of miracles, and her late reference to Palestine, engendered in his brain a horrible, a terrible, an impossible thought. And yet----

"What are you talking about?" he asked harshly.

The cry of a soul on fire broke on his ears. "You brute, when I suffer so! Does it need words?"

"Does what need words?"

She dashed her hand on the open page of the Bible. "This--this!"

"Augh!" He rose and sat down, with cold hands and a white face. The meaning of what she meant crashed like the blow of a bludgeon, and his brain spun to the shock "Leah!" he heard himself say, in a far-away voice like a telephone whisper. Then he stopped to stare at the quiet woman who sat upright, with rigid features and tightly clasped hands. "Leah," he muttered again, and some indefinable feeling made his hair crisp at the roots.

"Yes!" That was all she said, and her lips hardly moved in the saying.

Kaimes looked aimlessly round the room, and noted the pattern of the window-curtains. Only the whistling of the coals, spouting smoke and jetting flame, broke the stillness. His eyes returned to her face, fair and stainless. "Impos--s--sible!" he jerked, his voice entirely beyond control. "Im----" then his nerves vibrated and his skin crept.

"Three doctors in London, five doctors abroad, assured me that it is not impossible--unfortunately."

They were like two pale ghosts sitting in the shadows. Said one ghost to the other: "But have you--are you a----?" His tongue refused to form either terrible word.

Leah unexpectedly flung up her arms with a scream, then brought two shaking hands across her mouth to stifle that wild note of human pain. Right and left, up and down, did she look, as though to be certain that no one was within earshot

but the vicar. "It will never do to let the servants hear," said the rapid action. Lionel's benumbed brain could not yet take in wholly the appalling truth--if truth it was. The leper dropped her hands and looked at him heavily.

"You lying devil," said Leah, slowly.

"What? what? what?" babbled Kaimes, incoherently.

She groaned and rocked with hands palm to palm between her knee. "I will, be thou clean; I will, be thou clean." Over and over again did she moan the words, till they bored into the listener's brain.

"God have mercy!" murmured the man, trying to be a man. The creeping paralysis of the horror almost struck him dumb. But he managed by a violent effort to wet his lips with a stiff tongue, and made it form certain words: "Are you sure of this?"

"Three doctors," went on the Duchess, rocking and droning as Demetrius did aforetime--"three doctors, five doctors, eight doctors in all. They said the same thing--ugh!--such a beastly thing! It was the truth, though. Doctors never lie like parsons. And that Book with its falsehoods--that----" She lunged forward without rising, and grabbing the Bible pitched it into the fire. Lionel snatched it from the flames; Leah struck it from his hands; and then ensued a silent struggle, uncanny, savage, in which some leaves were torn. All at once she relaxed her grip and lay back crying quietly. "It's a shame, a shame!" she wept softly; "just when everything was going on so well. And it can't be cured; all the money in the world can't cure me. I must die--in bits;" her voice soared shrilly, and she crouched, as though being beaten. "Ugh! That kiss, that beastly kiss!"

"Leah, how did you get this disease?"

The woman took no notice, but sprang up, as though moved by springs, flinging wide her arms, and looking upward in wild rebellion. "I won't die--I won't. I refuse to give in--I refuse;" she tore up and down the room, speaking in angry undertones, as one always mindful of possible listeners. "I have always had my own way!" was her whispered argument--"always--always; why can't I have it now? There can be nothing up there; no, no--there can't be. If He does exist He would not have let me go so long on my own. I am strong--I have never met any one stronger. I must win--I have always won. I will win!" her voice rose tyrannically. "I am myself; who can be stronger than myself? And yet this

thing"--a strong shudder shook her into weakness--"this vile--vile---- Ugh! ugh! I believe there must be Something. Can you tell me, you--you who assume to know the secrets of the stars?"

She lurched forward in a frenzy of deadly fear, cannoned against Lionel, and dragged him down into his chair, clasping his knees, and knocking her forehead against them. "Where is your Master?" she whimpered. "Tell Him I'm sorry--really I am sorry. He may cure me then, as He cured that man long ago. Gentle Jesus--the children call Him so; He can't be cruel to me--to me. He can't be cruel to any one, so they say--ah, they say, they say; but how do I know? It's not true, it isn't true, and yet if it was--if it---- Lionel----" She broke off with the squall of a terrified child, hiding her eyes pitifully. "I'll be good--I'll be good, if only--only He will do this! It's a little thing--oh, a very little thing. And you said that He could--that He, your Master, I mean. Oh! oh! oh!" With sobbing breath she unwound her arms and fell back beating the carpet with open palms. Murmurings went rhythmically with the padding sound. "I want to be clean; I want to be clean; I want to be clean."

Kaimes tried to lift her. "Let me summon help."

With a bound she was on her feet, pushing him back. "Do that and I kill you," she panted, clenching her hands and facing him furiously. "No one knows but these doctors--yes, and Katinka, and that fiend Demetrius. Strange also. If I had Strange here"--she hammered with closed fists on the vicar's shoulders--"I would cut him into bits; I would blind him somehow; I would--I would--oh, what would I not do? Why couldn't he leave that infected beast to die in Siberia? Oh, the--the--the----" She poured forth a torrent of words, which made the listener grow hot and cold with shame. Then again she collapsed as the chill of a deadly fear struck at her heart. "I don't want to die--I don't want to die!" and against the wall she rocked with arms held crosswise over her eyes, swinging, ever swinging.

The scene was like a nightmare; but by this time Lionel had the grip of his emotions. "Leah," he said firmly, and advancing close to the writhing creature, "you must tell your husband; you must----"

Out came her arms with a circular swing, and struck him fair across the eyes. "Jim doesn't know; Jim must never know."

He was almost blinded, but persisted. "Leah, something must be done."

Her voice sank, and with it her rage. "Something must be done," said she, faintly--"something shall be done, and--soon."

"What do you mean?" he asked, half under his breath, and half catching at her intention.

She took no notice. "Sit down, please!" said Leah, quietly, and Kaimes obeyed, since to summon assistance would only be to precipitate a still more dreadful scene. The Duchess looked into the mirror and arranged her hair; also she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief, and smoothed her wrist-cuffs. When she did speak it was in the smooth voice of a society hostess asking a visitor if he took sugar in his tea. "I have made a fool of myself, Lionel. But you must admit that I am rather severely tried just now."

"Oh, you poor soul!" His tone and look were pitiful.

"Reserve your sympathy till you hear what I have to say. But first tell me honestly, can Christ cure me?"

"Yes--if it is His Will."

"Then let Him."

"You must have Faith."

"Faith in what?"

"In His power and Will to heal."

"How can I believe, when I do not believe?"

"He died for you on the Cross."

"He did not. That was purely a political matter because the Jews feared the Romans. I have read Strauss; I have read Renan; the four Gospels also: you can't puzzle me. He was a good man, a very good man--quite a saint, if you will. But--the Son of God?" She shook her head with a hard frown of disbelief.

Lionel was at his wit's end. "Then you cannot be cured?"

"No;" she looked at him steadily, an awful smile curving the corners of her mouth. "I thought you would fail me at the last."

"But how can I----?"

"You can't, so there's no more to be said." She sat down with a little sigh. "Dear me, how very hot this room is! Would you mind opening the window?"

Kaimes did not move. "Leah, go to bed, and let me send for one of those doctors you consulted."

"Useless! useless!" She waved him aside calmly. "They have spoken. I know the worst; I am prepared to face the worst. Are you? Hold your tongue," she added peremptorily, as he opened his mouth. "Listen!"

From beginning to end did she relate the whole fraud--the sham death, the stolen money, the betrayal, and the punishment of the kiss. Her voice was perfectly calm, her posture easy, and her self-control admirable. The listener grew white and red, became nervous and angry, quivered with disgust, recoiled with loathing, as she unfolded the brutal tale of her sin and treachery. Leah spared him no detail, however painful; she even made herself out to be worse than she really was--if that were possible. From the buying of Demetrius by that butterfly kiss in the picture-gallery, to the revenge of Demetrius in that stuffy cabin, when she struggled in the arms of one who had been what she now was, she related the whole without a blush, without a tremor, in a quiet, level voice, unmoved, and utterly shameless. The horror of her position seemed to remove her from the region of human emotions and morals. It was the unveiling of original evil.

Lionel did not interrupt, but closed his eyes with a sick feeling as she drew to the end.

"I first noticed that something was wrong when my hands burned as I washed them. I thought nothing of it at the time; but the feeling became so painful that I saw my doctor. He said--well, you can guess what he said. I consulted another, and another: the same diagnosis. I went abroad, but the doctors in Germany and France told me the same thing. I knew it was true. I felt in my heart it was true. Ugh!" She paused. "There is no cure--none, none." Then she finished, with a nervous titter, "Pleasant for me, isn't it?"

"Don't!" gasped the vicar, leaning his head on his hand, and much too qualmish to speak.

"Oh, you needn't look like that. I have to suffer, not you. I kept wondering how I got the beastly thing, and although I fancied it might be that kiss, I could not be quite sure. Katinka enlightened me--she was always a good-natured girl. After the death of that little reptile, she returned to England and watched me. Seeing that I went to doctors--she must have watched very closely--and then abroad, she wrote a letter--such a nasty, spiteful letter. But I always thought Katinka was a cat. Would you like to----?"

"No, no; I have heard enough."

"And you call yourself a man--pooh! You must hear. I learned from the letter that Demetrius contracted the--the--well, what he suffered from, amongst the natives of Kamchatka. He intended first to show me up; but when that horrid girl told him how she had hurt my mouth, he knew that by a kiss he could--ahr-r-r! He was a doctor, you see, and the skin being broken, it was easy for him, knowing what he did, to do what he wanted--the brute! That was why he kissed so hard, and----"

"Stop! stop!"

"It is beastly, isn't it? That's all, I think."

She was examining her finger-nails when next Lionel stole a glance at her. He scarcely knew what to say. Her treachery and the result of her treachery were both abominable. That a beautiful woman, gently born and bred, should sin so vilely seemed incredible. For beautiful she was, sitting there calmly under the uplifted sword of Azrael, the Angel of Death; and vile she confessed herself to be. Yet he could hardly accept either the physical degradation or the moral turpitude.

"You may be mistaken, after all," he stammered vaguely.

"Because I am not an object," she replied, with a shrug. "How like a child you are to require proof! I don't intend to become an object, I can tell you."

"But if there is no cure----"

"There is another way. Of course, it is disagreeable, but what is one to do in such straits?"

The vicar guessed her meaning, and violently threw off the weakness with which her story had infected his manhood. "I forbid you to heap crime upon crime," said he, firmly and insistently.

"I shall do what I like. Do not dictate to me, if you please."

"But God----"

"I don't believe in God."

"You do; you must. Does not this shameful punishment which has overtaken you in the hour of triumph declare the anger of a great and terrible God?"

"No!" Her expression was mulish.

"Woman! woman! Kneel and ask for mercy."

"I won't ask for mercy when I'm being treated so badly. Never! never! Just when things were going so smoothly, too; the money coming in by the bushel, and Demetrius out of the way. I call it a shame; it's mean, spiteful, cruel. I intended to have such a jolly time, and now--now----" Her voice faltered and broke.

She swung with a groan to one side of the chair, hiding her face and breathing heavily. That deadly fear of the inevitable would grip her, do what she would.

"Leah"--Kaimes' voice shook a trifle--"God is very good to you."

Her eyes stared at him bleakly. "Very good?"

"We are put into this world, not for the pampering of the flesh, but that we may learn through trouble how to become more spiritual. Our souls are of God, and to God they must return, rising through much tribulation to His necessary perfection. Sorrows are sent for the flesh to bear; not as punishments, but as lessons to be learned. Of our vices, says St. Augustine, we can frame a ladder to ascend heavenward, if we but tread them beneath our feet. This you have never known."

"And I do not know it now."

"From your dreadful trouble will come the knowledge; in this way alone can humility come. God, out of loving pity for your unbending pride, which prevents the Holy Spirit from entering your heart, has beaten you to your knees. On your knees, then, ask for mercy, for light, for purification of your unclean soul. God's staff, which He gives to all in life's pilgrimage, has changed into a rod. He gave you all things, and you used His gifts to glorify the flesh. Now in His infinite love has He sent trouble----"

"I've brought that upon myself."

"For your amendment it was permitted that you should do so. Out of your pleasant vices have you made whips to lash yourself. The wages of sin is death; you have sinned, and the wages--oh, Leah, Leah, bitterly cruel as it may seem to you, I rejoice that the wages should be so paid."

"You are a Job's comforter, I must say," said the Duchess, sullenly.

"Because I can see how this tribulation of the flesh can save your soul alive. God might have struck you dead in your wickedness, and with justice, for your wilful sin. Instead of doing so, He has given you a lingering disease, that you should be brought to acknowledge His power and also have time to repent."

"There is nothing to repent of."

"Shame! shame! Even from a worldly point of view you have sinned grossly; how much blacker, then, are your deeds in God's sight! But they can be made white; the past can be wiped out by sincere sorrow."

Leah twisted her hands above her head with a cry of impotent rage. "How can I repent, when I do not even feel sorry?"

"You will not ask Christ to help you. Repentance is a gift, as is Faith. He will give both, and His undying Love, if you will but confess your sin."

"I have done so--to you."

"Who am powerless. Confess it to Christ; weep as did Mary at His wounded feet. Hard as is your heart, He will melt it; soiled as is your soul, He will cleanse

it. Now--now, when human aid is vain, now is the appointed time. Repent and be saved!"

"If I try to, will He--will He cure me?"

"That question I cannot, dare not answer. His mercy is infinite."

"You say that to me, knowing what I suffer."

"I say it to you who suffer. In no other way could the Spirit have brought you to the mercy-seat."

"He has not brought me now," she persisted obstinately.

Lionel fell on his knees and caught her restless hands.

"Oh, your poor, sinful soul, for which Christ died!" he cried passionately; "to whom can you go but to God? Doctors cannot cure you; He can, if it be His will. He may even make your flesh clean."

"Ah! And that question you declined to answer a minute or two back. Besides, you denied that miracles could take place."

"I did not. No one ever came in vain to our Blessed Lord, when He walked the earth some two thousand years ago. As was His power then, so is it now. He loved in those days, He loves now. Sitting on God's right hand, He is ready to succour the vilest. His arm is not shortened, His pity is not exhausted. In mercy He may even cure you of this dreadful disease, as He cured the afflicted man we read of. Only acknowledge that God is mightier than you are; only bow to the rod, only admit your sin, only cry for pardon."

"If He will cure me----" she began, wavering.

"That you must leave to His love and wisdom. Cure you He may; permit you to suffer, He may see fit. But save your soul, He can. That much I can swear to."

"I want this horrible thing cured," she cried passionately.

"To continue in your sins? To soil your soul anew?"

"No! no! If I repent----"

"Repentance includes submission. God may not see fit to cure you; it may be your punishment--and I think it is--to bear this woeful cross, which if rightly borne may lead you to the light of lights. The flesh! The flesh! You but think of the flesh, of the passing world, of the vanities of life, of the enjoyment of the senses. From these things God would lead you away to contemplate spiritual realities, and the appointed path has been made known. Bear your cross--oh, my dear, bear your cross, and endure to the end that you may be saved. Terrible as it may seem, this evil, whence good will arise, has removed you from temptation. If you live secluded----"

"Dying piecemeal," she cried, in a frenzy of anger, and wrenched away her hands. "No, no; I will not live. I will die--die. At least I can do that."

"As did Judas! Leah, if you cannot bear your punishment in the flesh, how will you endure it in the spirit? Live for Christ, and what matters the world?"

"Everything! everything! I know what I am; I do not know what I may be. Here--in this tangible world--we are safe--safe!"

"From God? Can you say that, when His hand has struck you down? I tell you, poor sinner, that thus does He show His mercy. As is your crime, so must be your punishment. But Christ can pardon your iniquities, and Christ will, if you only plead for mercy and for grace."

Leah rose, crimson with rage. "You'll drive me mad. I don't want your spiritual life, your next world of shadows and moonshine. Give me life--life--life!"

The cry of the flesh was so insistent, so futile, so blind in its desire, that Lionel shuddered. Still on his knees, he began a fervent prayer. The miserable woman walked rebelliously up and down the room, fighting against the conviction now slowly being driven home to her understanding, that He whom she had mocked and defied was indeed the Most High God. But she still fought against a submission she knew well would have to be made. Beg for mercy she would not: her heart could not feel, her intelligence could not grasp. But, somehow, she knew. A dreadful thing had reduced her to impotence, and the ego could not battle against the Something it had hitherto flouted, but now furiously admitted might exist.

There remained but one thing to do, but one dark way to take. Do it and take it she would. But Lionel more than suspected her intention. Lionel would thwart her, and she would be compelled to live--live on, an object of disgust and pity. "No! no!" was her inward cry, as the imploring voice of the vicar rose and fell, and died away in a last tremulous Amen. For the last time, therefore, did she set her wits to plot for the ego.

"Lionel," said she, hesitatingly, "will you send for Jim?"

The vicar's face lighted up. He saw in this request what she meant him to see, a sign of yielding. "You will let me tell him?"

Leah nodded. "There is a doctor in Vienna," she whispered, inventing recklessly with the cunning of one driven to bay; "he has found out a cure, I hear. If Jim will take me over----"

"I'll telegraph to Hengist Castle at once," cried Kaimes, making for the door impetuously.

"And come back to dinner," said she, following, "I can't pass the evening alone."

"I shall come."

"But you won't frighten me any more with this religious talk?"

Lionel pressed her hand sadly. "I have done what I could, Leah. Only the Holy Spirit can bring home conviction to your heart. Try and pray."

"Yes," assented the Duchess, submissively; "it is all that is left."

"Then the better part, which cannot be taken away, is left."

He went away quite deceived, since she had suggested the Viennese physician so calmly. He thought that she still hoped desperately, and for all he knew the hope might be fulfilled, seeing the present-day resources of science. Certainly he never dreamed how she had hoodwinked him, and so sped on his errand of mercy, leaving behind him a woman too broken to exult in the success of her final piece of trickery.

It was all over. Man could do nothing; God would do nothing. As Demetrius had been smitten for the crime she had induced him to commit, so was she being punished for the evil she had called into being. Lionel had talked nonsense, of course; but he left behind him a feeling in her mind that the God he worshipped did exist. How the belief had come into her heart, she could not say; but it was certainly there. Try as she might, with all the strength of her brilliant intellect, she knew that never again could she be an atheist. God existed to her comprehension at last. But the newly-conceived Deity was not the Father of love and light. Rather did He appear an omnipotent tyrant, who had driven her to bad courses by giving her tastes she was unable to satisfy, and who now punished her for acting as the nature He had given her dictated. She was like a mouse in the claws of a cat, and could no more escape than could the tormented little beast. Only to the height of acknowledging that Something much stronger than herself existed could she rise; and her submission was as that of Caliban to Prospero. Wrenched violently from the egotistic wrappings of her soul, she--the true self, the immortal spirit--stood naked and shamed, yet defiant. She submitted, because only submission was left. But all her flesh shouted furiously against its victor.

Then, again, as the tormented soul strove to overcome the lower material self, did she recall Lionel's words. God was love, he declared, and in love had God broken her shield of self, snapped her sword of desire. Certainly, now that this world could do nothing for her, she would be forced to seek the other. There she might learn how to rise from darkness into light. That the spiritual existed she was now reluctantly convinced; that a study of its meaning would bring her peace she could not be certain. Of course, it was early days yet. She had gained a great step by the admission that God reigned, even though He had proved it to her so cruelly. It might be that by endless striving she would learn something of His love before Death ended her intolerable sufferings. God ordered her to fly; was it worth while to trust to Him for wings?

The struggle of the soul wavering between hell and heaven might have ended in the victory of the latter, and Leah might have consented with bitter tears to bear the cross laid upon her shrinking shoulders. But while wearily pacing the room a chance glance showed her in the mirror that beauty of which she had been, and was, so proud. Leaning her arms on the mantelpiece, she examined every detail lovingly and long. Could she bear to see that gradually disappear? Could she accept life as a Thing and not as a Being? Those blue eyes would grow dull and animal; that glorious hair would drop off; that complexion of cream and roses

would--would---- Ugh! ugh!

"No! no! no!" The rebellious cry of the flesh ascended to the stars. "It must never be--never."

All that she knew herself to be revolted against the slow wasting agony that would most surely come, to reduce that splendour of her beautiful body to the dust, dishonoured and shamed. To save herself from such infamy it but needed an overdose of chloral. Then in the pride of her loveliness she would pass away painlessly, without disfigurement, triumphant in a minor degree, at least. With all the indomitable strength of a will that had been only thwarted by Him who had created that will, did she resolve to snatch this one poor laurel-leaf from the Almighty Victor. Turning from the mirror, she felt that her mind was steeled, that Self was not entirely defeated. After all, her unconquerable will would win.

"To-night," she whispered to her shivering soul, "when I go to bed. An overdose of chloral, and then, when I awaken----" She stopped, with the chills of death at her heart. "Oh," was her despairing admission; "You are the stronger!"

It was the cry of the flesh making sullen submission. In vain did the soul piteously beg that its tabernacle might yet hold it a little while, for the purging of its sin. The flesh would not hear. Beaten, conquered, shamed, tormented, its petty triumph could yet be obtained in this hour of defeat. And the terrified soul, sobbing unheeded, waited for the rapidly approaching hour which would send it forth disembodied--whither?

CHAPTER XXXV

"We regret to announce to our readers the unexpected demise of the Duchess of Pentland at Firmingham, Essex. According to the Rev. Lionel Kaimes, who

dined with her Grace on the evening of her death, she was in the very best of health and spirits. The unfortunate lady retired at a comparatively early hour, and was found dead in the morning by her maid. A brief examination proved that death was due to an overdose of chloral, which her Grace was in the habit of taking when suffering from sleeplessness. The Duke of Pentland, who was expected at Firmingham, arrived shortly after the painful discovery, to be greeted by the disastrous intelligence.

"The loss of this highly popular lady will be greatly felt in high circles. Her beauty and wit were exceptional, and only to be surpassed by her truly kind heart. It may be well said that she lived to make others happy. To the unfortunate her purse was always open, and to the afflicted her soothing presence was a welcome relief. Again and again did she sacrifice herself in the cause of charity; and in many ways unknown to the public did she do good by stealth. Her graceful presence will be much missed at various great functions during the coming winter season; but it is the poor and needy who will most keenly feel the loss of one whose large heart was ever ready to aid them in trouble.

"Much commiseration is expressed for the Duke of Pentland, who was most tenderly attached to his beautiful consort. A brilliant star has disappeared from the social firmament; but what is more lamentable, a noble, religious, charitable lady has gone, leaving a place which can never be filled. The funeral, which will take place at Firmingham next Tuesday, will doubtless be largely attended by those who loved her and knew her worth. The world can ill spare such a one, who illustrated in her conduct and qualities the highest attributes of womanhood. She was a great lady, a true, tender woman, a sincere friend, and a model wife. What words could better befit her untimely grave than that eulogy on Dorcas set forth in the Acts: 'This woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did'?"

FINIS

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